スレイヤーズ すまっしゅ。
4
蘇る王
神坂一
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Slayers Smash. 4:
The Resurrected King
By Hajime Kanzaka

Machine Translated and Edited by Eff_Efferson
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For more: visit tenchimuyotranslationblog.blogspot.com

Translator Foreword:

This series has been around over 30 years and has over 30 volumes; no one has successfully translated it; It is abandoned and likely will never get a proper translation.
I have the means to translate it so I can read it, so that's what I did.
Here is the fixed up translation edited to near perfection as I read through it.
The entire series should be done soon, I just need to read through it and edit the document first. That's the main limitation here. It will be released on archive.org for archival purposes.

All my translations are free to derive from. Make your own edits if you want to fix up formatting and Grammar. Use them to help your own translations, I will officiate any fixes submitted into new editions.

The Cursed Saint

The heat in the venue had reached its absolute fever pitch.

"Everyone! Thank you so much for coming today!"

A voice, amplified by wind magic, resonated through the vast indoor space. On the stage stood a single girl. She wore a white dress reminiscent of a flower, and her fluffy blonde hair fell in loose waves. She looked to be about the same age as me.

Her name was L'oréal. The object she held, a stick tipped with a large jewel amulet, was the magical tool used to amplify her voice. She held the stick to her lips and raised her voice even higher to speak to the crowd.

"This is the last of the hot sermons! So please, listen to my new hymn: *N*☆Ceifeed!"

"YAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

The believers gathered in the hall thrust their right hands into the air and let out a roar. To call them "fans" wouldn't have been a metaphor or a mistake. After all, this was Sedum City, the town where the great temple of the Flare Dragon God, Ceifeed, was located. This was the very temple dedicated to the God Ceifeed.

While traveling aimlessly, I had visited the Sorcerers' Guild in this city and was asked to head to the temple to cooperate with the girl on stage—L'oréal.

The details of the request were somewhat vague, but they had offered an exceptional reward. I was told it was an incident that could drive a wedge between the Sorcerers' Guild and the Church of Seifeed, so I couldn't exactly turn it down. I was given a letter of introduction and sent on my way, told that she should be preaching at the temple during the morning hours.

When I finally arrived... the place was magnificent, built of white marble. However, the scene inside the sanctuary was... well...

To my eyes, it looked exactly like a concert in full swing, complete with up-tempo music and choreographed dancing. From the audience toward the stage flew "prayer strips"—scripture copies written on ribbons—and "offerings" wrapped in paper, raining down like confetti.

When the song she called a hymn finally ended, L'oréal took a ragged breath and spun around gracefully.

"Well then, everyone! See you at next week's sermon time!"

"Oohhhhhh! L'oréal! L'oréal!"

As she bathed in the chorus of the believers, she vanished behind the curtain at the back of the stage.

"Today's sermon has concluded. We look forward to your next visit. Furthermore, donations and confessions are accepted at any time—"

A business-like announcement signaling the end of the sermon played from somewhere, but the excitement of the believers showed no signs of cooling down. I pushed through the heat of the crowd and made my way toward the back of the temple—or rather, the "backstage."

"Are you the one from the Sorcerers' Guild?"

In the waiting room deep within the temple, an elderly man standing beside L'oréal spoke after glancing through the letter of introduction I had presented.

"Lina Inverse... is it? Pardon my late introduction. I am the High Priest here, Wilson. And this—" He pointed to L'oréal, who was sitting in a nearby chair. "—is our star priestess, L'oréal Ritta."

"I see... Star...?"

As I knitted my brows, the High Priest gave a smile.

"Ah, it seems that phrasing isn't common elsewhere. It simply means she gives the sermons that receive the best reception from our believers."

"By 'sermon,' do you mean that concert from earlier...?"

"It was a sermon."

"A sermon—" I started, but he cut me off with a firm, unwavering smile.

"Preaching the teachings can often leave a stiff impression, but the essence of the teaching is what matters, not the format. To begin with, our doctrine does not deny music or entertainment. Therefore, we thought: why not combine religious nature

with entertainment to appeal to a wider audience and gain more followers? That was the start of this 'Star Sermon' system. Music, dance, production, and preaching—by utilizing these, we capture the hearts of the believers! Our plan worked, and our followers have doubled! We've had such success that people even visit from distant cities just to hear the sermons."

Is that even allowed? I wondered.

"I... I see..."

Despite the various doubts bubbling up, I gave a non-committal nod for the time being.

"What I want to ask of you," the High Priest continued, "is to accompany L'oréal to a certain place and have her retrieve a certain item. Please understand: you must not be the one to take it. L'oréal must be the one to retrieve it."

"I don't mind that, but... where is this 'certain place'?"

"I will guide you."

The one who stood up and spoke before the explanation even began was L'oréal herself. Her face was visibly clouded with a look of frantic haste.

"If possible, I'd like to leave right now. I'll explain the details on the way."

Her voice, which still held a lingering youthfulness, had a ring of urgency.

"---But L'oréal---"

"There's no time!"

Her voice, which cut off the bewildered High Priest, was nearly a scream.

"Even as we speak, it's steadily—"

She choked on her words and bit her back teeth. I was certain I didn't misinterpret the slight shimmer of tears in her eyes. It seemed she really was in a hurry. In that case...

"I'm fine with that," I said with a nod. "If you don't need any preparation, we can leave right now."

"Thank you!"

L'oréal's voice brightened, and she turned a pleading gaze toward the High Priest. Faced with that, the High Priest had no reason to shake his head. Though he looked somewhat worried, he spoke.

".....I understand. Well then, Miss Lina, may I ask this of you immediately?"

"Roger that."

"Then, this way!"

As she answered, L'oréal grabbed my hand and started walking. Following her without resistance, I asked, "So, where to?"

"Mount Lansas, on the outskirts of town. It is a mountain owned by this church... and the place where the Holy Spear slumbers."

She answered while keeping her eyes fixed straight ahead.

Before long, we arrived at the mountain; it was closer than I had expected. The sound of the wind blowing through the canyon reminded me of a woman's scream. The path leading to the mountain was a single suspension bridge spanning the gorge. At the end of the bridge stood a heavily closed gate and two armed priests.

We had left the temple through the back exit, passed through the town, and entered the mountain path. The deep, sheer canyon showed signs of human intervention. In other words, this landmass, which looked like an island on land, had been artificially created.

"It's L'oréal and her companion. I believe you've heard from the High Priest."

When she spoke to the two sentries, they removed the lock and placed their hands on the gate.

"Good work."

"Please be careful."

The priests gave their greetings. Come to think of it... was that *thing* really helping spread the teachings of Ceifeed? From what I saw, the people who came for the "sermon" seemed to be exclusively the type interested in *her*.

Screeeeech...

The doors groaned as they swung open. Beyond them lay a mountain path half-buried in weeds.

"Wait, I can't just let that go."

L'oréal and I looked at each other, nodded, and stepped past the gate. After treading through the grass and hearing the gate close behind us, I spoke.

"Don't you think it's about time you explained the situation?"

I prompted L'oréal, who was walking a few paces ahead. She had said she would explain on the way, but she hadn't said a word since leaving the temple. She had told me that there was a shrine along the path where the spear was kept, and she told me the origin of the Holy Spear, but the origin story sounded like a typical legend you could find anywhere.

"......Right."

Showing some hesitation, she ran her right hand through her hair.

"As you saw, I give sermons in front of the believers... but among them, there are those who are more interested in me than the teachings. There are about 20 of them."

"Ugh."

"Among them, there was a man who belonged to the Sorcerers' Guild in this town... and he asked me to go out with him. I turned him down, of course, but some people take that badly."

"There's always someone like that, isn't there?"

At my remark, she stole a quick glance at me and continued, sounding a bit troubled.

"That person... he put a curse on me."

I couldn't help but let out a small groan. I see... for the Sorcerers' Guild, this was a mess caused by one of their own. That's why it was an incident that could "drive a wedge" between them. The reason they requested a woman like me for a high fee was

likely out of concern that if they carelessly chose a male guard, history might repeat itself.

"So... that's how it was..."

"So, what kind of curse is it, exactly?"

As if enduring something, she tousled her hair.

".....The person who did it apparently boasted about everything himself. He said he put a curse on me using the power of the Demon King—the Ruby-Eye Shabranigdu."

"---The Demon King's power!?"

I accidentally raised my voice. The Ruby-Eye Shabranigdu. According to the legends of the Flare Dragon, he was the being who fought a desperate battle against the Dragon God Ceifeed for the existence of the world in the distant past. Setting aside whether gods and demon kings actually existed, it was an undeniable fact that a source of immense power worthy of those names did exist.

In fact, the attack spell I used, the *Dragon Slave*, borrowed the power of the Demon King. If it was a curse using such power, just how strong was it?

L'oréal, walking ahead of me with her head slightly bowed, was hidden from my sight.

".....The Sorcerers' Guild apparently gave him a severe punishment..... and we tried to break the curse under the High Priest's direction. But....."

She choked on her words there. Of course, I knew the rest without asking. If the curse had been broken, there would have been no need for me to be here.

She continued.

".....Right now, we're performing a ritual of blessing to use the God's protection to slow the progression of the curse. But... while the God's power is strongest at dawn, as time passes, the power of the curse gets stronger and stronger....."

Her voice trembled, and she clutched her head with both hands. Her wavy hair became tangled in her white fingers.

"Calm down, L'oréal."

I ran up to her and hugged her trembling shoulders.

"There's a way to fix it, right? That's why I was called and why we came to this mountain."

".....Y... Yes..... That's right....."

Though her breathing was somewhat ragged, she continued.

".....Priestesses, or rather, female clergy, sometimes receive oracles. We don't know when, where, or how they'll be given, and they aren't always useful, but what is told is an unmistakable truth. And this time, there was an oracle. It said to go to Mount Lansas and that I should retrieve the Holy Spear directly."

"I see. By the way, L'oréal, hold on a second."

I told her to wait. There were three of them. Beyond the mountain path, where the bushes grew thick and blocked the view, I felt a presence watching us. They weren't human. There was no malice or hostility, simply a will to strike us down.

"Probably wild dogs or wolves—"

"Please be careful!"

L'oréal's face turned pale in the middle of my sentence, and she hurriedly hid behind me. Well, to an ordinary person, wild animals are scary enough. It was no wonder she was frightened. But for me, Lina Inverse, they were no problem as long as I didn't get careless. If I scared them off with a loud attack spell, they'd likely retreat in a hurry.

"They're probably—!"

I immediately began chanting a spell without waiting for her to finish. With a rustle of the bushes, three shadows revealed themselves. They were indeed wolves.

However...

The fur all over their bodies had fallen off in patches, revealing raw skin underneath. Their eyes were two gaping black holes without eyeballs. They were already dead. They were turned a bluish-black and dried out—Zombies—no, rather, Mummies. Either way, it made no difference!

The moment I confirmed their form, I released the spell I had been chanting without hesitation.

"Vibration Bullet (*Dug Haut*)!"

I had intended to use it as a scare tactic if they were just beasts, but that wouldn't work on these emotionless things! I instantly shifted my aim and scored a direct hit on one of the three! With a single blow, the target shattered, scattering across the earth like fragments of dried clay. Judging by the texture, they were mummies rather than zombies.

"What is the meaning of this!?"

Why were there undead in a place that was supposed to be a holy land?

"They're acting as guard dogs!"

The answer to my grumbling came instantly from L'oréal.

"This is a sacred mountain, after all! It seems they created the cliffs and the gates, and then released undead animals to keep common people from entering!"

I backed away to create some distance while somehow managing to complete my incantation. Undead in a holy land? If anything, I felt like that was defiling the sanctity of the place. But more importantly...

"If they're guard dogs, they shouldn't be attacking people from the temple, right?"

"Freeze Arrow!"

I fired off my spell as well, leaping to the side to dodge a flurry of icy arrows flying toward me!

"Wait—!"

I heard L'oréal's frantic voice from behind me, but—well, I hoped she'd do her best to dodge! One of the cold arrows I fired struck one of the mummy-wolves directly, pinning it to the earth on the spot. The remaining one tried to scramble away in a panic, but it only ended up losing its balance. My shot caught it head-on! Flowers of

ice bloomed upon impact, and the mummy-wolf was dealt with. When I glanced over my shoulder, L'oréal appeared to be unharmed.

"What did you say!?" I asked while glaring at the spot where the mummy-wolves had been.

L'oréal's answer was: "In the temple's old records, it says this!"

"It says, 'They didn't think that far ahead'!"

Those records are useless! I thought. Or rather, whoever caused this mess needs to come out here right now! Sit down and apologize!

Just as I began chanting my next spell, the two remaining mummy-wolves kicked off the ground.

At that moment!

"Freeze Arrow!"

The voice that echoed around us, however, was not mine. From behind the mummy-wolves, arrows of cold light shimmered in the sunlight and came flying in—roughly a dozen of them! Their targets were the mummy-wolves, but the trajectory was incredibly annoying, as we were right in the line of fire!

Cling! Cling! Clang!

I managed to parry the arrows with my short sword. However, I couldn't afford to relax. I recognized that voice—the one that had fired the spell before me. And just as I expected...

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! It seems you're having quite a hard time, Lina Inverse!"

From beyond a stand of trees at the end of the path, a black figure appeared along with a laugh that pierced my eardrums.

Long black hair, a black cloak, spiked shoulder guards, and a skull necklace around her neck! Not to mention the needlessly revealing outfit. *Don't laugh, don't talk, just put

some clothes on!* It was Naga the Serpent, the "disappointing-yet-plentiful" self-proclaimed rival of mine.

She wasn't the only one who appeared. Another person was standing beside her.

"Marlene!" L'oréal cried out.

She had bright chestnut hair and looked a little older than me. She was quite a beauty, but her outfit was what stood out. It was a flashy, ornate dress based on white—completely unsuitable for mountain hiking. Its design lines were very similar to what L'oréal was wearing. She was likely someone from the same temple.

"Oh, are you alright, L'oréal?"

The woman called Marlene questioned L'oréal in a mocking tone.

"I heard you went to the mountain, and I rushed here thinking I might be of some help, you see? Oh, by the way, this is Naga. We met recently through a small stroke of luck, and I asked her to help me this time."

At the introduction, Naga puffed out her chest grandly.

"Hmph! That's right! Now that I am lending a hand, you have nothing more to worry about! Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

However, L'oréal's gaze was fixed solely on Marlene, not Naga.

".....Thank you, Marlene. I truly appreciate the sentiment. But how did you get this far? Did you get permission from the High Priest?"

The words were thankful, but L'oréal's voice and eyes were filled with hostility and caution.

"Is there really a need to go out of one's way to get permission just to go help a friend?"

Marlene forced a smile, but it looked strange.

"Besides, it's quite a shame, isn't it? To be loved by such an odd man and have a strange curse put on you."

Twitch! At that explanation, a blue vein popped out on Marlene's forehead. Well, of course.

"But being too popular is a problem in itself," L'oréal retorted. "Until recently, my sermons were more popular than yours, weren't they?"

"......Don't say that."

Marlene's voice had a sharp edge to it. These two clearly didn't get along very well.

"......Um....."

At my bewildered murmur, L'oréal finally looked away from Marlene and turned a full smile toward me.

"Oh, Lina, this is Marlene, she's from the same temple. But this is something I have to do myself."

"I understand that. That's why I'm only here to 'help'."

With smiles that didn't reach their eyes, the two exchanged words. However, Marlene ignored L'oréal's attempt to stop her and continued coldly.

"If this curse progresses as it is—"

L'oréal's fingers clutched at her hair, which was now tightly curled.

"I told you not to say it—!"

"You'll end up with an Afro, won't you?"

A complete silence dominated the area for a split second.

"YAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

A scream of despair shattered the silence as L'oréal clutched her head.

".....Wh... what? An Afro?"

".....Ah."

I hesitantly asked, and she began to writhe even more.

"L'oréal? Um... about the Afro hairstyle..."

"I don't want to hear that word anymore! Noooooo!"

She had said it was a curse from the Demon King.

"Yes. An Afro."

Marlene was the one who spoke in a cold tone, crossing her arms.

"Just as you think. A frizzy, fluffy Afro."

Every time Marlene spoke, L'oréal let out a shriek. Setting that aside...

"Your name was Lina, wasn't it? Have you not heard the details from L'oréal? A sorcerer who was obsessed with L'oréal's sermons put a curse on her."

"Ah. No. I heard she was cursed... but... an Afro?"

"Yes. A curse that turns your hair into an Afro."

Now that I thought about it, L'oréal had mentioned that the power of the curse was weak in the morning but gradually increased. Indeed, her hair was clearly more curled now than it had been during her sermon.

"That... that's such a pathetic curse!"

"What do you mean 'pathetic'! Lina! Easy for you to say!"

L'oréal shouted, her eyes narrowing at my unintentional comment.

"This is a huge deal for me! By evening, it'll be completely turned into corkscrew ringlets! I don't even want to imagine what it'll look like while I'm sleeping! Even you, Lina! You wouldn't like it if you got an Afro, would you?"

"Well, I'd hate it, but... it's not exactly life-threatening..."

"What are you saying! In a sense, it's a matter directly linked to my life!"

"What? You die if you have an Afro?"

"I'll die!" she answered instantly. "Just imagine it! One day, I show up with an Afro to give a sermon to the believers! Do you think everyone would still follow me?!"

"......Probably not."

Unless that was her original hairstyle or she lived in an area where Afros were popular, if L'oréal suddenly appeared one day with an Afro, people would either think it was a gag or be completely turned off.

"Right? If the curse is fulfilled, my life as a star priestess is over!"

L'oréal argued passionately with tears in her eyes. Well, it would be "over" in that sense, certainly. Since the content of the curse was something as deflating as "turning hair into an Afro," the sorcerer who cast it probably wouldn't receive a very harsh punishment. There was no way he'd be executed for the crime of "Forced Afro-ing." While the effect was comical, it was a calculated move to push her mentally and cause her to fall from her position as a star priestess.

Naga was likely the only one who hadn't noticed the tense atmosphere.

The fact that an oracle who was given that could do something about the curse was probably completely outside of the sorcerer's calculations.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! I haven't even shown a glimpse of my true power yet because nothing happened on the way!"

Marlene, however, had been muttering complaints in a low voice while breathing heavily for a while now. But now that I knew the goal, there were plenty of ways to handle this.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

I walked alongside L'oréal and spoke to her. I couldn't have imagined that the God and the Demon King, who fought for the existence of the world in the distant past, would have their powers clashing again over whether a hairstyle would be an Afro or not at the end of time.

".....I see. It must be tough... for the God and the Demon King."

Hearing that the ultimate result of the curse was an Afro caused my motivation and sense of urgency to plummet... but a job was still a job.

"Calm down, L'oréal. The point is, we just need to break the curse, right? Moping around won't break it. So, we've got no choice but to keep moving forward, right?"

".....You're... right....."

After giving her a pep talk, I turned to Marlene.

"By the way, Marlene, I'm actually an acquaintance of Naga over there. So you are, too?"

"Ye... yes....." Marlene dodged the question, looking away.

Naga, on the other hand, said proudly, "Hmph! I was hired as her guard when she went to a nearby town a while ago! My skills were recognized then!"

"I see... you hired Naga as a guard? That must have been tough."

When I asked in a sympathetic tone, Marlene started trembling.

".....At that time..... I had three ribs broken....."

I knew it, I thought. If Naga had gotten serious, it probably wouldn't have ended with just that.

"I see... well, it's good that it wasn't worse. Anyway, let's all hurry on."

I said that and gave a bright smile. The mountain path was rough, but not impossible to walk. Still, for L'oréal and Marlene, who seemed unfamiliar with hiking, it must have been a fairly difficult road. L'oréal, driven by the approaching threat of the Afro, was pushing ahead at the front.

"---L'oréal, you're going too fast. I know you're anxious, but if you don't pace yourself, you'll burn out halfway through."

"---But—"

L'oréal stole a glance over her shoulder at Marlene and Naga, who were lagging behind. She lowered her voice.

"---Lina, about Marlene... I think she's planning to interfere with me taking the Holy Spear."

"---I know," I replied, also in a low voice.

She had said she would "help," but her true intentions were likely the exact opposite. She probably resented L'oréal for taking the position of star priestess—or she was plotting to fulfill the curse and turn L'oréal into an Afro so she could return to being the most popular. Bringing someone like Naga along while claiming to "help" made her intentions obvious. She probably hadn't told Naga she was going to interfere. She just knew that Naga would end up being a hindrance even if she wasn't told.

L'oréal and I went ahead, while Naga and a complaining Marlene stayed a little distance behind.

Both Naga and I stopped in our tracks at the exact same time. Realizing this, L'oréal and Marlene stopped as well. Judging from the presence, it was more undead. There seemed to be more of them than before, but the problem was how Marlene and Naga would act.

"Yes."

I quietly approached L'oréal and whispered in her ear.

"In the confusion, we'll separate from those two and go ahead by ourselves!"

L'oréal nodded firmly. But Marlene was likely thinking the same thing—that she would use the confusion to hinder us.

I began chanting a spell under my breath.

Rustle... Emerging from the overgrown grass and thickets were five or six mummy-wolves!

In that instant!

"Purification Barrier (*Bless*)!"

Whoosh!

Without a word, the purification spell Naga released completely obliterated every single mummy-wolf without any drama, build-up, or complication!

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

And then came the idiotic laughter!

"If I know the opponent is undead, this is child's play!"

She put her hands on her hips and puffed out her chest. As she bragged, Lina, L'oréal, and Marlene all spoke in unison:

"READ THE ROOM!"

"WHAAAAT!?"

Naga cried out at the accusation.

"Wait...!? Why am I being complained at? I was useful just now!!"

".....Ah, yes. You certainly defeated the enemies quite efficiently."

"Yes, yes. You were very useful."

".....Tch."

"Why does everyone sound so disappointed? And someone even clicked their tongue!"

It might not have made sense to Naga, but from our perspective, she always ran wild when we expected her to act normally, and acted normally when we were counting on her to run wild. We couldn't exactly be honestly thankful.

Naga grumbled, but we ignored her and continued walking. However, before long, Naga and I stopped once more.

Alright! More undead have arrived!

"Hmph. It seems—"

Just as Naga started to say something, everyone else's gaze pierced through her!

"But of course! It seems the time for me to shine has come again!"

Even after what just happened, Naga had no ability to read the atmosphere. Before the approaching undead could even show themselves, she began chanting a purification spell without hesitation—

"It's dangerous, Naga!"

THUD!!

A flying knee kick from Marlene slammed into the back of Naga's head!

"Bugeh!?"

"Good job, Marlene!" I cheered.

I prioritized speed! To shake off the relentless Marlene and her group, I veered off the mountain path, forcing my way through the undergrowth and slipping between trees, flying as if crawling up the mountain slope!

I gave her a thumbs-up and began chanting a spell under my breath. Eventually, one of the mummy wolves burst through the bushes at the same time—

"Explosive Smoke Dance!"

Chupo-dodogodogodododo!

Finally, I unleashed the spell I had been chanting!

"Lina-san! Look at that!"

This spell scattered countless tiny fireballs around. Despite its flashy appearance, its attack power was negligible. If it hit a person, it would cause a mild burn at best. Since it wasn't autumn with its dry leaves, I didn't need to worry about forest fires in this season of lush green.

L'oréal cried out, and as I looked in the same direction she was facing, I saw something beyond the trees. *There!*

I controlled my trajectory and headed that way, canceling the spell at an appropriate spot to land. We were around the mountainside of the Holy Mountain. The spell was basically just a smoke screen! Of course, it wasn't for the mummy wolves, but for Marlene and Naga.

"Now, L'oréal!"

I took her hand and dashed through the swirling explosive smoke! Chanting a spell under my breath, I scooped L'oréal up in my arms.

"Raywing!"

I activated the high-speed flight spell. This spell, which involves wrapping oneself in a wind barrier to fly through the sky, has a total power proportional to the caster's skill—factoring in height, weight, and speed. Since the weight increased by carrying L'oréal, I sacrificed altitude and flew at low altitude, just barely skimming the ground.

Standing hidden among the groves were large stone pillars arranged in multiple concentric circles, with a single shrine at the center. No—they weren't just pillars! After the stone fragments burst away, what remained were the same number of large humanoids!

Stone Golems! They had been draped in extra fragments, pretending to be harmless stone pillars. Now, they started moving as guardians of the shrine!

"Wait...? This is...!"

L'oréal looked shaken. But if these things were the guardians of the shrine...

"L'oréal!" I shouted. "There must be a way to stop them! Didn't the High Priest tell you anything to watch out for when opening the shrine?"

"—Come to think of it, I did hear something!"

The shrine was about the size of a hut. It was a solid stone structure with elaborate carvings; the years etched into it gave off a solemn atmosphere rather than an impression of being old. Upon seeing it, L'oréal trotted through the stone pillars toward the shrine and reached for the door. In response to my question, she snapped back to her senses and began to weave words in a clear, melodic voice.

"---I am the child of God---I am the child of Sedum City. I am the child who protects order---Following the distant covenant, I seek the Holy Spear---"

The words of the oath rode the wind and reached the golems.

Gogan!

With a loud crash, the surrounding stone pillars burst apart! She took a deep breath, looked at me, and said, "He told me to be absolutely sure to say this before touching the shrine door!"

"You're too late! Aaaaaaaaah!"

The golems began to move. Because L'oréal had touched the shrine door before finishing the oath, they viewed her as an enemy desecrating the holy ground.

"Li-Li-Lina-san!"

"Run and use the shrine as a shield!" I yelled.

If they were golems protecting the shrine, they wouldn't destroy it. However, given their numbers, L'oréal wouldn't be able to keep running forever. Ordinarily, L'oréal would be caught before I could wipe out the golems with attack spells. No, maybe there was a way!

I hurriedly chanted a spell under my breath. In the meantime, the golems swarmed toward L'oréal, raising their giant arms! She frantically ducked around the side of the shrine, but another golem was there, its arm raised high.

The heavy arm roared through the air—

"Damu Brass!"

Gogaa!

It shattered under the impact of an attack spell! It wasn't mine. That meant, naturally—

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! It seems I made it in time!"

The piercing, idiotic laughter rang out! Emerging from the mountain path were Naga and a panting Marlene!

I had various thoughts about her, but that one hit really saved us! However, now another one was trying to attack L'oréal! But here, my spell was complete! I didn't hesitate to release it!

"Damu Brass!"

Gogaa!

Of course, shattering a single golem wouldn't change the situation. However... Yes! I didn't aim for the golem; I aimed for this!

The thing that shattered with a roar was the shrine door! Viewing me as an enemy for harming the shrine, the golems that had been swarming L'oréal now turned toward me! Of course, a few were still targeting her, but the numbers had significantly decreased!

"L'oréal!"

Now was the chance! I called out to her. "I broke the door! Now! Get the spear!"

"---Ye-Yes!"

Inside the dim shrine, I could see a silver spear hanging on the wall. Though L'oréal was stumbling from the shock, she moved to the front of the shrine.

"Naga-san!"

Seeing this, Marlene raised her voice in panic! She definitely wanted to interfere with L'oréal! But she couldn't just say "stop her!" If she did, she'd be the villain, and Naga would just be confused! Besides, there was distance between them and the shrine! So, what did Marlene do?

She shouted to Naga, "I'm counting on your skills! Use a flashy spell that can wipe out all those golems at once!"

"Hmph! Leave it to me!"

Naga replied and began chanting a spell. She intended to goad Naga into blasting both L'oréal and me away! It would be hard to dodge an indiscriminate, wide-range attack spell!

Damn, she went for that!

"I won't let you!"

I chanted a spell to stop Naga while kicking off the ground to close in! But before I could, a golem stepped in the way! *Agh! Get out of the way!*

I changed direction to go around it. In the corner of my vision, I saw L'oréal rush into the shrine and yank the spear off the wall. With a beaming smile, she ran out of the shrine with the spear in hand.

And then, Naga's spell was complete! *Oh no!*

Praying I wouldn't be hit, I threw myself to the ground at the same time she cast it.

"Dug Haut!"

Bajoom!

Countless bolts of lightning connected and pierced heaven and earth. This spell, Dug Haut, combines the powers of wind and earth spirits to rain lightning over a wide area. That said, the power of the lightning was low; a direct hit would only knock a person unconscious. Because it was born from those spirits, the lightning likely interfered with the earth spirits animating the golems, causing a malfunction. Well... I doubted Naga had thought that far ahead, though.

I saw it all. The lightning striking the golems. And the lightning repeatedly striking the metal spear held by L'oréal, who had come out of the shrine looking so happy she was practically skipping. Her body gave a massive shudder, and she collapsed on the spot.

On the other hand, one wouldn't expect such a low-power spell to work on golems, whose selling points are durability and power. Yet, surprisingly, the golems hit by the lightning collapsed one after another and stopped moving. I see.

"L'oréal!"

I wasn't hit, perhaps thanks to diving for cover or just plain luck. I picked myself up and rushed to her side, where she lay fallen.

"---No way..."

I stood frozen beside her. Naga and Marlene ran over as well.

“Did it...?" Marlene leaked a voice of pure astonishment.

L'oréal, who had collapsed unconscious while holding the spear, now had perfectly silky, straight hair.

The oracle had been fulfilled.

A salad of vegetables and sliced pork with sesame dressing. Onion potage with bacon. Savory pie and steamed chicken, freshly baked bread, and various cheeses. While eating this light breakfast, Naga muttered from across the table.

"---But still---"

"Eh? But what?"

Naga knit her brows slightly. It was the morning after the incident, in the dining room on the first floor of the inn. L'oréal had lost consciousness from the lightning strike, but she had no injuries at all. Her hair had become silky and straight, and her joy upon regaining consciousness was something to behold. Marlene had offered hollow words of congratulations with a strained smile, but Naga likely remained oblivious to Marlene's true feelings.

Naga said with a bit of pride, "To think a curse borrowed from a Demon King's power could be erased by a lightning spell. If that's the case, my skill is equal to or greater than a Demon King!"

"...Ah... well..."

I leaned over the table and said in a low voice, "I thought about it a bit, too... but I actually think the curse might not have been broken."

It was true that L'oréal's hair had become silky and straight. However...

"I was thinking... maybe the direction the curse curled her hair and the direction the lightning curled her hair were just exact opposites, so it ended up looking straight."

A wrinkle formed between Naga's eyebrows.

"I mean, I asked for details afterward, and the oracle only said to take the spear; it didn't seem to say that doing so would break the curse."

".....Ah....."

Naga groaned with a complicated expression and looked away. If my hypothesis was correct, L'oréal's hair was a latent afro. If any kind of stimulus hit her hair, there was a possibility it would turn into an afro all at once.

".....Let's just not think about it."

For once, I was in total agreement with Naga's opinion.

"Ye... yeah. And if by some chance something happens, it'll surely be a sign from God that this method of preaching isn't good. Yeah."

"What a nice phrase! Yes, exactly. There's no need for us to worry about 'signs' or anything!"

"Exactly."

"Ahahahaha!"

After the two of us laughed together for a while, we hurriedly finished breakfast and left the town post-haste.

As for what happened to L'oréal and the church in Sedum City later? Of course, I don't know anything about that.

Translator note: Her name is ロレアル loriaru, This is how you say the french shampoo brand name in Japanese. This is a hair based story, so I’m interpreting this as intentional and using that name.

(The Cursed Saint: Finished)

Truth Lies Within

I stepped inside. My gaze, which had been scanning the menu on the wall, came to a sudden, dead stop. I had been on a wandering journey, and in a town I reached around lunchtime, I'd popped into a random eatery I spotted. Up to that point, everything was the same as always.

Wooden slats hung on the wall, displaying the establishment's offerings. In one corner...

"Welcome," the older woman coming to take my order said. She followed my gaze and added, "Ah, guest, we don't have any Mellows today, so please forgive us."

That was it. There, exactly where I was staring, was the sentence: *'Mellows is unavailable.'*

Mellows—it was a word I didn't know, but based on the flow of the conversation, it was obviously food.

"What is it? This 'Mellows' thing?"

When I asked, the woman blinked a few times. "Oh. So that wasn't what you were after? Then don't you mind it," she said, brushing it off easily.

Of course, being told that only made me more curious; it's just human nature.

"Oh, no, no. It's not like I desperately want it, I was just simply wondering what kind of thing it is."

"Ah. It's better if you don't mind it. You know how it is—sometimes hearing the details just makes you want it even more."

"That definitely happens often, but..."

"But even if you end up wanting it, I can't bring out something we don't have. You're better off ordering something else and not worrying about it. Since it's the season, I'd recommend the trout and porto mushroom sautéed in white wine."

"...Well... I suppose..."

I wasn't satisfied. Despite feeling unsettled, I gave a noncommittal response. I was curious, but as the lady said, there was no use throwing a tantrum for them to serve something they didn't have. I figured I'd just have a light meal here and look for this "Mellows" at another shop. I chose something appropriate from the menu and placed my order.

But then—
".....What is the meaning of this.....?"

I finished my meal and left the shop. In the middle of the main street, I stood there, utterly stunned. This was the town of Teekit, nestled in the mountains. It wasn't particularly big or small, and it didn't have any notable characteristics. For a town of this scale, the main street was crowded.

Shops lined both sides of the street, and stalls were visible here and there. Perhaps because it was midday, the scents of various foods drifted through the air, mingling together.

I stopped in my tracks on that street and looked again. Every single restaurant lined up there was displaying the same phrase at their storefront.

Namely: *Mellows is unavailable*.

Though the location and size of the signs varied, the fact that every shop put out this disclaimer meant there must be a huge number of inquiries from customers.

Apparently, it was a local specialty... but in all the villages and towns I'd visited until now, I'd never heard a rumor that this town had a specialty.

In any case, however,If I were to leave without eating a local specialty, the name of Lina Inverse—warrior and genius beautiful sorceress—would be tarnished! (Even if being a warrior or sorceress has nothing to do with it! It's still tarnished!)

Now, the problem was how to find a shop that served Mellows. As I was thinking—

"—Then fine already! I'll try somewhere else!"

Along with a voice I recognized, a familiar silhouette jumped out of a nearby shop. Long black hair, a black cloak, spiked shoulder guards, and a skull necklace around the neck!

Clothing with a pointlessly high amount of exposure! Of course, it goes without saying! The hazardous substance of Seirune, Naga the White Serpent!

"Naga! What are you doing in a place like this!?"

My self-proclaimed rival, a 100% natural disaster. Fortunately, she hadn't noticed me. Before I got involved... wait. I changed my mind and called out to her.

As she noticed me, she ran a hand through her hair irritably. "Oh, Lina. What a coincidence. I wonder what you're doing in a place like this?"

"Oh, Lina. What a coincidence. I wonder what you're doing in a place like this—" I mimicked her, then said with deliberate meaningfulness, "The same as you."

Naga looked surprised. "Then... were you investigating the Mellows thing?"

Bullseye. From Naga's words and attitude, I had thought—*maybe*—and just as I expected, it seemed she had been looking into Mellows too. In that case, there was no way I wasn't going to use this.

I let out a sigh and shrugged my shoulders. "Yeah. I've been walking all over the place, but no shop has it. How about you?" I pretended as if I'd been checking around this whole time.

"It's the same for me. No matter where I go, they don't have it, they don't have it."

"I see—" (Probably because it's Naga, she couldn't even hold a conversation with the shop people... just how low is your investigation ability, you?)

"So, Lina, what about your side?"

"I've just found out they don't have it after going around a few shops. I haven't heard as far as what kind of thing Mellows actually is yet—"

I gave a vague excuse, thinking it might not be the right season.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! You make me laugh, Lina Inverse!"

Alright! She took the bait! Inside, I did a victory pose. When people see someone struggling in a similar situation, they can't help but want to tell their own tale of woe. In other words, by pretending to have shared the same hardship, my strategy was to get information the easy way!

Without noticing a thing, Naga continued wearily. "Even if I try to ask, they just dodge the subject. They won't even tell me if Mellows is a name of a dish or what!"

"What's that?"

I swallowed the words that almost escaped my mouth. To think they wouldn't even tell her what Mellows was...

"Forget whether they have it or not—to begin with, whether it's a vegetable or meat—"

"I-I see. So it's like that."

Of course, I hadn't actually investigated anything, but I couldn't very well say that now. In this situation, there was only one way to wipe the smirk off Naga's face.

"Fine. Then Naga, come with me! I'll show you how easily I can find out what Mellows is!"

"Hmph! How interesting! Then I suppose I'll see what you can do!"

Naga and I ended up in a flow of investigating Mellows together.

Naturally, the people I questioned weren't just at restaurants. Stall vendors, passersby. From the children of the town to the fishmongers, grocers, butchers, and fruit sellers. Even a very old-looking grandpa.

Our gazes threw sparks at each other,

"..... You've got to be kidding....."

How much time had passed since then? However, there was absolutely no results.

Naga and I stood on the main street, unable to hide our exhausted expressions.

"Hey..... it's like a bad dream, right...?"

Since there was such a lack of results, even Naga, who was just coming along, looked haggard.

To think that even after all that questioning, I really didn't know what Mellows was. Wherever we went, the signs said *'Mellows is unavailable.'*

When I asked if it was out of season, they said it wasn't exactly that, but they didn't know when it would arrive. When I asked what kind of thing it was, they replied there was no point talking about something they didn't have. No matter how I asked, they just gave me the slip.

'I'm not from this town, so I don't know.' 'Mellows lives in each and every one of your hearts.' 'Yoko-san, is it time for dinner yet?' and so on; none of the answers contained anything like a clue.

"Don't you think it's weird, Lina?"

".....It's weird. No matter how you think about it," I said.

"If that's the case, there's only one possibility!" Naga pointed a finger straight up. "Someone who wants to monopolize Mellows is putting pressure on the townspeople!"

"...I can't say that's impossible."

It’s natural for people to want to eat delicious things. Unfortunately, however, among humans, there are those who aren't satisfied with just 'wanting to eat lots of delicious things' and also have the annoying thought of 'and I don't want to give any to others.' If such a person happened to have money and power, they might buy up the town's specialty and force the residents into silence...

"That's it! If that's the case, the townspeople must be troubled too. If we tell them the situation and suggest that we can solve the problem and get the goods back into the shops, someone will definitely talk. It would be a benefit for the shops too!"

"I see! Depending on how the conversation goes, we might even get a reward *and* get to eat Mellows!"

"Exactly! Let's start questioning with that tactic right away!"

Having said that, Naga and I headed toward the nearest shop in high spirits!

It was a failure.

"......It's no good, Lina....."

"......That's strange....."

Standing on the street once again, I tilted my head. We had visited several shops and tried the pitch according to the plan, but there was none of the reaction we expected.

"Maybe we're being looked down on because we're women. Like they think we couldn't solve it even if they told us," Naga said.

But, "..............Hmm..... I feel like it's different from that! Mellows is probably this town's specialty, so it should be a pretty big blow if it's not coming into the shops. Yet the shop people didn't have a sense of crisis, and it didn't feel like they were hiding anything or lying."

"Now that you mention it, I get that feeling too—"

"You guys—"

At that moment, a low voice cut Naga off and reached my ears. When I looked that way, there was a man standing still deep in a gap between the shops lining the street—a space too small to even be called an alley.

He wore a wide-brimmed hat pulled low over his eyes and was wrapped in a seasoned cloak. From his unkempt beard, he looked to be in his late thirties or forties, but perhaps he was actually younger.

From under the brim of his hat, the man directed a sharp gaze toward us.

"Don't get too deep into the Mellows business. If you value your lives, that is."

That voice, like a low murmur, reached our ears clearly despite being near the noisy street.

"—Eh—"

Naga and I instinctively stood frozen. Simultaneously, the man turned on his heel and walked away. He had probably overheard us talking about Mellows and gave us that warning-like remark—but that meant, beyond a doubt, that he knew something.

"Wait! Hold on a minute!"

As Naga and I snapped back to our senses, we rushed over there in a hurry—and got stuck! Our shoulder guards hit each other at the entrance of the alley!

It wasn't just the shoulder guards. Due to the construction of the buildings, the gap where we were was narrow, while the area further in where the man was had widened.

"Hey! You're in the way, Naga!"

"That's my line! Well, fine! Then you go first, Naga!"

This was no time to be arguing. When I pulled back, Naga turned her body sideways and tried to slide into the gap between the buildings.

"Ugh.....! This is a problem. My chest is in the way; I can't get through."

"Ahahaha. I want to punch you."

Unlike my refined, clear, and slender body, Naga's nutrition seemed to go to her chest instead of her brain. Being pointlessly reminded of that naturally made me angry.

In front of me as I felt the veins popping in my forehead, Naga backed away and put on a full-faced smirk.

"It seems this is your turn, Lina Inverse! It's okay! With your size, you can definitely get through! Go on!"

"Shut the hell uuuuuuuup!"

WHACK!

With lightning speed, I pulled a slipper from my shirt and threw it. It hit Naga square in the face!

"Wait.....? What was that for, Lina!?"

I glared back at the glaring Naga. "It's obvious! I'm just taking the fight you sold me! You should be grateful it wasn't an attack spell or a rock!"

The slipper I had been keeping warm in my shirt for just such an occasion had proven useful. At my words, Naga braced herself.

"I see..... soooooooooo! You mean we're settling this here!"

"I don't mind that at all."

I said, stepping back to take a stance—wait, that's not it!

By the time I snapped back to my senses and looked, it was too late. The man’s figure had completely vanished.

".....We let him get away....."

As I slumped my shoulders, Naga gave me a cold look. "Hmph. If only you had gone through quickly."

"That was because you started a fight—"

"Anyways!" Naga raised her voice, cutting off my retort.

"This makes it all clear! There’s definitely someone plotting to monopolize the Mellows! That man is just their lackey! He's trying to scare us into backing off! Wh-i-i-ich means! If we just keep investigating, they're bound to come to us themselves! Then we just counterattack, make them confess everything, and it’s problem solved! Ho-ho-ho-ho!"

I listened to such speculations, yet for some reason, I couldn't shake a strange sense of unease. Whether I was resting or moving, time continued to pass. While we conducted an inquiry of questionable fruitfulness, the sun began to tilt toward the west. If we were going to push on to the next town, we had to leave soon to arrive before nightfall, but neither Naga nor I had any objection to taking a room in this town and continuing the investigation. Neither of us was in a particular hurry, and if we left now, it was certain that the matter of the Mellows would weigh on our minds indefinitely.

Besides, from the standpoint of gathering information, taking a room made sense. Inns for travelers often had a small restaurant on the first floor and guest rooms on the floors above. In other words... naturally, the innkeeper ought to know about the Mellows.

At the reception desk of an inn on the main street, I asked the old man for a double room. Upon hearing the price, I pinched some silver coins from my leather pouch.

Stopping my hand mid-motion, I asked, "Come to think of it, not just here, but all over the place, there are signs saying 'No Mellows.' Why aren't there any?"

The old man gave a wry smile. "Even if you ask why... I can only say that what we don't have, we don't have."

"Is it because they're seasonal and haven't come in, or some other reason?"

"Well... there's no point talking about things that aren't coming in, is there?"

"...Hmm. So you won't tell me." I made a sulky face and tossed the silver coins back into my pouch. "I don't really want to stay at an inn that's so mean to its guests..."

"W-wait a minute!" At my reaction, the innkeeper hurriedly called out to stop me. "It's not like that. It's... how should I put it..." In an awkward, low voice, he asked, "...If I speak honestly, will you stay with us?"

Yes! Finally!

Naga and I exchanged glances and gave a small nod to each other. "If you speak honestly, sure," I said, taking the silver coins out again and placing them on the counter. However, I kept my fingers pressed firmly on top of them.

The old man scratched his head. "I'm no match for you... It's not a very dignified story, so I didn't want to tell the guests..." His tone became even lower. Naturally, Naga and I leaned over the counter to hear better. Following suit, the old man leaned in too. "Actually—to tell the truth, we've never actually carried Mellows here even once."

"—Huh?"

Startled by the unexpected, anticlimactic answer, Naga and I recoiled in unison. My fingers reflexively left the silver coins, and the old man snatched them up instantly.

"When we serve meals, all sorts of people come in asking if we have Mellows. When we're busy, we can't deal with them one by one, so we wrote that and put it up," he explained, gesturing toward the "No Mellows" sign near the entrance.

"Th-then—" Regaining my composure, I asked, "What exactly *are* Mellows anyway? Are they meat, vegetables, fish? What's the taste or texture like...?"

"Well, that's just it..." The old man lowered his voice even further, looking apologetic. "Since we don't carry them, I don't actually know what they are. This is just between us, of course..."

Needless to say, Naga and I were speechless at that absurd answer.

"Hey, Lina. Do you believe that story?"

After taking the room and dropping off our luggage, we headed back out into the town near dusk to search for clues about the Mellows, and Naga questioned me. "It seems impossible for someone to live in the same town and not even know what Mellows are... usually."

"That's true... but he didn't look like he was lying..."

"I suppose so..." Naga let out a sigh. "The possibility that the old man is actually a master liar isn't zero, but—"

"Anyway, we have no choice but to keep asking around," I started to say, but then I stopped dead in my tracks. The sun was slanting low in the west, and our two shadows stretched long across the ground. At the end of those shadows—standing in the dimming street—was a figure in a wide-brimmed hat and a cloak!

Without showing any hostility, the figure remained motionless.

"...I don't like the look of this."

"No questions asked! Freeze Arrow!"

Naga instantly created a dozen arrows of cold air in the void and unleashed them toward the man.

"You—!"

"I am not 'you'." In response to my involuntary shout, the man sent a sharp gaze our way. "My name is Ox. One of the 'Explorers.' It seems my warning not to get involved didn't reach you."

"Hmph! You showed up pretty quickly!"

The man let his lip curl into a small smile. "Give it up. Between me and you two, it wouldn't even be a fight."

"Let's just see if that's true or not, shall we!" As she spoke, Naga began incanting an attack spell.

While the surrounding pedestrians began to evacuate, sensing the dangerous atmosphere, the man—Ox—maintained his cold gaze without even showing a hint of bloodlust. "I don't like this sort of thing, though..."

Clang-clink-shatter!

In an instant, the sounds Naga and I made overlapped. Ox was hit directly by several freezing arrows and was easily frozen solid on the spot.

Startled by the lack of resistance, Naga and I looked around warily, wondering if it was some kind of trap. However, there was no sign of an ambush, nor any sign that Ox was going to move again.

"...Could that be the end of it?" I muttered with suspicion.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! He talked a big game, but it seems he was nowhere near the level of the Great Naga the White Serpent!"

Then, a voice rang out—none other than Ox's. Looking closer, although he was unable to move after taking several hits from the cold arrows, there was no ice around his mouth, and he seemed to still be conscious. He continued in a trembling voice.

"I said... it wouldn't even be a fight. I don't like this sort of thing. Let me ask, why do this? Did I do something to offend you?"

"—Wait a minute."

"What...?"

Yes. It was undoubtedly the same man who had left us that mysterious warning earlier. Naga growled and took a defensive stance. "We're going to get the truth out of you, even if we have to use force!"

"Force, you say?" I frowned at his words. "Wait, did 'I don't like fighting because I'm weak, so please spare me' actually mean what I think it meant?"

Ox managed a small smile. "What else could it mean? As you can see, I'm here frozen solid because I was too scared to move, right?"

You were too scared to move?!

"Ugh! You're so misleading! You should have just said you're bad at fighting!"

Listening to our exchange, Naga frowned. "So... what does this mean?"

"It means!" I pointed a finger sharply at Ox. "This guy is just a pathetic poser who wants to look cool!"

"Hey now, that’s a pretty rude way to put it. At least..."

"And? That warning about not getting involved, and the name 'Explorer,' those were just poses too, weren't they? Usually, people would think you're provoking them!"

I cut off Ox's nonsense and questioned him. "Why go to such lengths? You're gaining nothing—in fact, you're only losing out!"

The man didn't lose his smile as I interrogated him. "Don't you know? A man—no, a human being—has something called pride."

"You don't need *that* kind of pride!"

"I won't deny that. That’s one way of looking at it, too."

"Aargh! There you go with that way of speaking again! Just say 'Sorry, I was wrong'!"

"Um, Lina." Naga spoke up.

"What is it?"

"Before that..." Naga pointed at the frozen Ox.

He spoke while still smiling. "...If there's something you want to ask, I'll tell you as much as you want... is what I'd like to say..."

"—Before that?"

"...Could you... do something about the ice... I'm starting to... get sleepy..."

"Waaaaah!"

"Don't sleep! You'll die!"

Naga and I hurriedly chanted fire spells and began the de-thawing process for Ox.

"Life is a mystery." After draining a glass of warmed herbal wine, Ox let out a sigh along with his words.

Once we finished thawing him out, Naga and I brought him to the restaurant on the first floor of the inn. Since dinner time was approaching, other customers were trickling in. When I prompted him to talk, Ox sent a distant gaze toward the horizon.

"It was—let's see. About three months ago when I drifted into this town. Though I might not look it, I'm a traveling minstrel."

"You don't even have an instrument, though," Naga pointed out.

Ox raised a hand to silence her. "Don't be so hasty. An impatient woman is cute, but even if you beg, results don't always come immediately."

"Yes, yes. You don't have to use a 'cool' phrase for every little thing. So?"

At my prompting, he adjusted the position of his hat. "Someone who can't even strike a pose isn't cut out to be a minstrel. Anyway, I came to this town and I encountered it. Yes—that sign that says 'No Mellows'."

So he was the same as us in that regard. But—had they been out of stock for that long?

"Naturally, I wondered. What kind of thing is a Mellows? Someone who can let the unknown stay unknown isn't cut out to be a minstrel. I asked around everywhere in town. When do Mellows come in? What on earth are Mellows? However—"

"You couldn't find out the truth, right?"

"Just like us?"

At our words, Ox gave a small nod. "Indeed. But while I stayed in this town and kept investigating this and that, I made comrades. Fellow travelers like me—and you—who were trying to uncover the identity of the Mellows. We decided to cooperate and investigate together. The name of the group we formed was 'The Explorers'."

"What a needlessly cool name," I remarked.

Ox wagged his finger. "Coolness isn't needless. It's a necessity for living. A 'Group for Investigating Mellows' might be easy to understand, but it's not cool and the name is

too long and hard to say. Well, things were fine up to that point. But even with the five original members investigating, we couldn't catch a glimpse of what a Mellows actually was."

"Wait...? You mean you've been investigating for three months?"

At Naga's surprised shout, Ox replied calmly, "Yes. From then until now. No matter how much I ask the townspeople, the only answers I get are 'What we don't have, we don't have' or 'There's no point talking about something we don't have.' Wasn't it similar for you two?"

He was absolutely right. He continued.

"It's all well and good to continue the investigation, but the more time passes, the more the costs for lodging and food pile up. A minstrel like me can make daily pocket money in this town while investigating, but people running normal businesses can't do that, and they have families in other towns. When their finances get shaky or they start thinking about their families, it's only natural to give up on the Mellows and return to their original lives. One by one, the members of 'The Explorers' left... and before I knew it, I was the only one left. But—no, perhaps because of that, I have no intention of giving up. It was a group I started half as a joke, but everyone's desire to know the truth about the Mellows was real. For the sake of my comrades who had no choice but to leave this town with their goals half-finished, I will absolutely uncover the identity of the Mellows."

With a light of strong determination in his eyes, Ox took a breath. "—Or so I tried to say to look cool, but... no matter how much a minstrel can earn daily, the customers get bored of the same songs! I don't know an infinite number of songs, either. So—finally, yesterday, I sold my harp, my tool of the trade, to a second-hand shop. You wouldn't want to end up like this, would you? That's why I warned you. Don't get too deep into the Mellows."

"I see, so that's what it was," Naga said in an exasperated tone. "You really have a misleading way of speaking."

"It's your imagination. I haven't said a single thing that was wrong."

"It's not wrong, but it's misleading!"

I tuned out their bickering, tilting my head in thought. If I believed what he said, even after three months of investigation, the identity of the Mellows remained unknown.

Was such a thing even possible? Even if there was a group that didn't want the Mellows investigated and had silenced the townspeople, it was hard to imagine that silence being perfectly maintained for several months. There didn't seem to be any sign that the townspeople were lying or hiding something, either.

On the other hand, what if Ox was actually a spy for that group, telling us a tall tale to make us give up? No, for a lie, the content was far too half-baked. If he wanted to deceive us, it would be much faster to serve up some random creative dish and claim it was a Mellows. It was probably more likely that Ox was just a poser who spoke in a way that invited misunderstanding.

I scanned my surroundings. Ox stood there with his usual aloof attitude. Inside the shop, a sign was posted: "There is no Mellows."

...No way...

"---Could it be?---"

A certain possibility occurred to me, and I muttered it in shock.

"Is something wrong?" Ox asked.

I hesitated for a moment before answering. "...I might be wrong, but... there's something I want to check regarding the Mellows. I can't really do it right now given the situation... but Ox, could you come back to this inn tomorrow morning around breakfast time?"

"Sure. I don't mind, but what is it? This thing you want to check?"

"I'll... tell you then," I said.

In my heart, I actually hoped my hunch was wrong.

Outside, the weather was clear. Through the wide-open entrance, I could see the sun-drenched streets and the blue sky. It was late morning—a bit too late for breakfast, but also a bit late for travelers to be setting out. Naga, Ox, and I were sitting at a table in the diner on the first floor of the inn, just like yesterday. Having finished a late, leisurely breakfast, we were the only customers left in the shop.

Well then. It was about time.

"Hey, pops! Thanks for the food. Check, please!" I called out to the old man who ran both the inn and the dining hall.

As I counted out the silver and copper coins for the amount he quoted, I looked up as if I had just remembered something.

"By the way, pops, just to be sure... you don't have any Mellows, right?"

"Yeah. Sorry about that," he replied with a wry smile. There was no lie in his attitude.

"Ah, right. You did say that. That this shop has never handled Mellows. Well then, let me ask you this: Has *this town* ever handled Mellows?"

At my next question, the old man's smile visibly twitched.

Ah... damn it. My guess was right after all.

Naga and Ox must have noticed the old man's reaction. They turned suspicious glares toward him.

The old man looked at me and asked timidly, "...Um... what do you mean by that...?"

"I mean," I said, finishing the count for the breakfast bill, "I'm asking if 'Mellows' even exists in the first place."

"What...?" Naga and Ox groaned in surprise.

I spoke up in their stead. "After all, nobody's technically told a single lie. It's the same as Ox's behavior. It’s not a lie, but it’s misleading—the kind of thing that invites misunderstanding. The answer was dangling right in front of our eyes from the start, wasn't it? 'There is no Mellows.'"

"Ah...!" Naga and Ox groaned softly.

"This town is on the main road, but it doesn't have any particular local specialty. Most travelers probably just passed right through."

The old man’s silence and his pale face told me my hypothesis was correct.

"So, someone probably came up with an idea for town revitalization. They decided to put up signs in the restaurants saying 'There is no Mellows.' They aren't lying at all, because such a thing never existed to begin with. But travelers who see that get the

wrong idea. They think this town has a famous product called Mellows, and that it's just out of stock right now."

Exactly as we had.

"If people get curious about what it is, some will stop and enter the shops, and some will even stay the night. Of course, if it were an outright lie, some people's consciences would have stopped them, or someone bad at lying would have slipped up. But since it’s just a misleading sign that isn't a lie, it probably felt like a light prank or a joke to the townspeople."

It made sense why none of them seemed like they were lying. They were all just telling the truth.

"Well, I bet the townspeople never expected a weirdo like Ox to come along—someone who’d keep investigating Mellows until he spent his entire fortune."

"E-entire fortune!" the innkeeper squeaked in a high-pitched voice.

I shrugged and pointed at Ox. "Yeah. This guy's a bard, but he says he's not cut out for it if he can't handle not knowing something. Apparently, he kept researching Mellows until his travel funds ran out. He finally sold his harp—his tool of the trade—to a junk shop the other day. Talk about reckless, right?"

"...That really is reckless," the old man said with a troubled look. "Young man, that's..."

The old man bowed his head. "But that... no, really, I'm sorry. This happened because of what we did."

The sound of a harp drifted on the wind, followed by a sonorous, husky voice.

"...Ox is actually a pretty good singer..." I muttered, pausing as I walked down the town street.

After what happened at the inn, the old man felt bad for Ox. He consulted with the townspeople and, as a token of apology, bought the harp back from the junk shop. They decided to hire Ox as the inn's exclusive bard for about three months. So now, Ox was showing off his skills to the innkeeper who had become his employer.

After seeing how things were settled, Naga and I left the inn. Given how that conversation went, the "There is no Mellows" signs would probably be taken down soon. Our room fees weren't refunded, but I figured I'd let that slide.

"By the way, Lina," Naga murmured as we walked, looking up at the distant sky. "If we ever come to this town again... and if there's a sign that says 'There is no such-and-such'... I'm definitely going to go on a rampage. Don't stop me."

"Don't worry. I think I'll be rampaging right along with you," I said firmly, with a perfectly clear smile.

Everyone, please be careful of misleading expressions.

(Truth Lies Within: Finished)

The Resurrected King

I stood before a stone sarcophagus that bared its hollow interior. Under the light of the magical energy I had cast upon the ceiling, there was already nothing there.

"...This is..." the elderly man wrapped in a black cloak muttered in a daze.

"There's no doubt about it now," I said, standing beside him. "Everything was taken a long time ago."

"How can this be..."

With a dejected moan, the man in the black cloak—my client, Mr. Janis Fried—staggered toward the sarcophagus and sank to his knees.

"W-what does this mean?" asked the young guide named Rock, looking flustered.

I gave a small shrug. "Well, life happens."

Mr. Fried was a member of the Sorcerers' Guild located a bit away from here. He studied ancient history, and after years of poring over various documents, he had finally pinpointed the location of a certain king's tomb—this very place.

He had climbed the mountain... and for the actual field survey, he had hired a traveling sorceress who happened to be there—namely, me, Lina Inverse—as a guard for the journey. He had also hired a young man from the nearby village of Toomo as a guide. This was the result of our trek.

I could have guessed it had been ransacked. The way the entrance was hidden was sloppy, which was suspicious from the start. Even so, we found no traps or treasures inside. Someone who got here first must have disarmed the traps and made off with the loot.

It's a common story for treasure hunters or wandering mercenaries to dive into discovered caves or ruins and take the treasures. One can't really complain about it. Still, after years of research, it was only natural for Mr. Fried to be depressed. He had clung to the final hope of coming face-to-face with the king's remains, but the coffin was magnificently empty.

Honestly, even I couldn't bring myself to say, "Well, there's nothing here, so let's just go home," in this atmosphere.

After some time, he slowly picked himself up. "...Let's go back..."

Toomo was a small village off the main road. I was a bit surprised to find an inn for travelers in such a place, but apparently, customers come here occasionally during certain seasons for medicinal herbs and wild plants that only grow in this area.

The inn wasn't very large. The dining hall on the first floor had four tables and some counter seats. Aside from Mr. Fried and me, there were no other customers. We sat at a table together, eating a dinner that was neither good nor bad—just plain.

"Did you notice, Lina-dono?" Mr. Fried, who had been silent until then, suddenly spoke up as we were finishing our meal.

"Notice... what?" I asked.

He lowered his voice. "The marks where the sarcophagus was opened were fresh."

"---Fresh?" I lowered my voice too.

"Yes. As I explained before, that is the tomb of the Tyrant Ardion."

He had told me that when I accepted the request. Tyrant Ardion—that was the name of the fifth king of the Ardeal Kingdom, which perished over three hundred years ago. According to legend, while he was skilled in sorcery, he used his power to rule with tyranny, extortion, and purges. He started wars of aggression against other countries on a whim, leading to the kingdom's decline. Eventually, he was forced to abdicate by his relatives and subjects and spent the rest of his life in imprisonment.

Basically, he was one of those classic failures of a leader who gets a bit of power, lets it go to his head, and ends up getting pummeled by everyone. Because of that history, his tomb was built away from the center of the country, and over the course of the kingdom's collapse and the flow of time, its location had been lost.

Mr. Fried continued. "Because someone broke into that place, outside air got in, causing mold and moss to grow throughout the tomb. Regarding the sarcophagus we saw today, there were marks where the stones rubbed together when the lid was slid open. The state of the mold in that specific area was fresher than in other parts."

"Huh—"

When he was crouching in the room with the sarcophagus, I thought he had just collapsed from heartbreak, but it seemed he had been observing things like that.

"In other words, the party that first entered the tomb didn't touch the sarcophagus. But time passed, and someone who entered recently opened it. That's how it is."

"...It's a mystery why the first group didn't touch the coffin, though I wouldn't say the second group was there days or months ago—it was probably within the last few years."

Tomb treasures are, after all, funerary goods buried with the body. If the tomb is of a scale that has funerary goods, the body itself would naturally be wearing ornaments. So, not touching the coffin was strange.

"Regarding that, there is the possibility that they feared the king's ghost."

"Ghost?" I echoed.

He nodded slightly. "According to one document, because Ardion was a tyrant, he was initially given a sloppy burial. However, after that, various strange phenomena and disasters struck the country, and there were many reports of people seeing Ardion's form or hearing his voice. It is said that the king, who was skilled in sorcery during his life, became a ghost through some method. The people were terrified and eventually re-buried the remains in a different location. In that sense, this place is less of a tomb and more of a place to seal away the tyrant's ghost. Actually, though they were covered in mold and moss, the sarcophagus was carved with various magical characters and warding patterns. There was even a line saying: 'If you do not wish to invite disaster, never disturb the king's sleep.' The person who first entered probably knew the legend or believed the warning, and thus didn't touch the coffin. But someone who entered recently, whether they knew or not, laid hands on it."

"And—they took the king's remains?"

"Likely. At any rate, I intend to look for whoever touched that coffin recently. They might still have something they took. If so, I would very much like to acquire it for my research."

"Look for them...?"

...No way is he going to ask me to keep guarding him for the same commission fee this whole time, right?

"Half of that is correct. However—"

With those words spoken from that same mouth, Fried-san barked out with bravado. Rock(?) responded with a composed smile. "I haven't been 'taken over.' I contracted with the King’s soul of my own free will. Right now, it’s more like we’re sharing my body, or living together, I suppose."

"Wh-what...!"

I had a look of utter confusion on my face, but he must have interpreted it differently.

"Don't worry," he said. "It isn't a story without a trail. If they searched for treasure in that place, they would have definitely used this village as a base. If they brought back something as large as a corpse, it would have stood out. If I ask the villagers if there was anyone like that in the last few years, the answer should come easily."

"—There is no need for that."

The answer came much faster than Fried-san had anticipated. We both reflexively turned toward the inn's kitchen. The door leading to the back opened, and a figure emerged.

"...Eh...?"

The confused groans from Fried-san and me overlapped. He must have been hiding in the back of the kitchen, listening to our conversation. The person who appeared was someone we knew. He looked to be just under twenty years old, of medium build with short gray hair. He wore the same sturdy, easy-to-move-in work clothes he had on during the day. However, the heavy voice that had just echoed was different from the Rock I had heard earlier.

".....What do you mean by that...?"

As I hovered off my seat to ask, Rock opened his mouth expressionlessly.

"I thought I would let it slide if you simply went home dejected that there was nothing in the tomb... but if you intend to pry into *Our* affairs, that is a different story."

"Did you say '*Our*'...?"

At those words, Fried-san stood up as well. "Could it be that you...!"

"—Indeed!" Rock barked. He spread both arms as if making a declaration to the world.

"...Oh no..." I groaned.

"Half of that is a misunderstanding," the following voice said—it was the Rock we knew.

"What's a misunderstanding?"

There was no mistaking him. It was Rock, the young mountain guide Fried-san had hired. He continued speaking to us as we stood there in shock.

"I hated this tiny village. It seems that every time the village was in danger due to epidemics or famine, they would gradually take treasure from there and sell it off to help the village. As you saw, there's nothing left now. But in the village, there was a long-standing legend: never touch the King's coffin at the very back, or there will be a curse. That's exactly why I thought—there must be something left inside that coffin."

"So you went and touched it..."

I was exasperated, but he showed no remorse. Instead, Rock—or rather, the tyrant Aldion who possessed him—pointed toward us.

"If you stay in this village and obey Us, then all is well. However, if you refuse, things will become slightly unpleasant."

"Wait a minute. Uh, King Aldion—"

The one who spoke up was the innkeeper who had been in the kitchen. "Please, nothing too violent, Ro—"

"Wh—! Lina-dono...!" Fried-san protested from the side, but I ignored him for the moment.

"Hmph... 'unpleasant things,' huh?" I said.

A meaningful smile played on his lips.

"I am the King! My name is Aldion! I am he who has been resurrected into this world after being sealed for an eternity!"

"I hated myself even more for being unable to live alone if I left this village. That's why four years ago, I laid hands on the stone coffin that was forbidden. As soon as I opened the lid, the King's corpse inside crumbled into sand and swirled up, and I heard a voice in my ear. *'Do you desire power? If you listen to My words and obey, I shall grant you the power of a King.'* And I accepted it. The King is now inside me, existing with me. That is all there is to it."

"But Rock is still in the middle of accumulating power. It is too early for the world to know I have been resurrected."

"Wow. I wonder what's going to happen to us."

The moment he said it, he kicked off the floor and lunged toward us! He was faster than I thought! But I could handle this!

"Fried-san, get outside!"

As I shouted, I kicked a nearby chair toward the incoming 'Rock'!

"Artless!" he barked, brushing the chair aside with one hand. But that single movement slowed his charge slightly. I lunged straight at him!

"What!"

He looked momentarily shaken, perhaps not expecting a sorceress like me to charge in head-on. But in that split second, I leaped sideways, changed my trajectory, and followed Fried-san outside!

"You! Do you mock Us?"

"No, no. I'm not mocking you. I'm just provoking you."

"I see! A provocation, then!" Rock's voice echoed.

'Rock' struck a pose with a sneer of rage. By the time he realized it was a feint and shouted, I was already outside the inn. Amidst the surrounding darkness of night, his right hand could be seen faintly shrouded in light.

"Hah!"

He bellowed as he chased after us. The moment he leaped out—I used a spell I had already prepared!

"Elmekia Lance!"

The blow struck home! It was a spell that dealt direct damage to the target's spirit. A human would merely be knocked unconscious, but for a ghost, it would usually mean instant annihilation! It wouldn't harm Rock's physical body, but it would be fatal for Aldion! Plus, by aiming for the moment he came through the door, evading it should have been nearly impossible!

I thought I had him—but at that moment, with a sharp shout, he swatted away my arrow of light with his right hand!

"Wh—?"

The strike, which shouldn't have been deflectable with a bare hand, shattered easily with a small sound!

"An attack that can't be brushed off with a bare hand can be handled if you shroud your hand in magic. With the power the King gave me, I can do this much."

"Come to think of it, there were stories that the King was well-versed in magic."

So, while the possession boosted Rock’s physical abilities, he also had full support from spells or whatever else. I see. He certainly didn't seem like an opponent I should take lightly. Still, there were plenty of ways to handle this.

"I think you should give up and obey the King's words. I'm telling you this as a warning."

I simply gave a short, derisive snort at those words.

"I see. Then, as you wish, you'll have to experience something 'unpleasant'!"

As he spoke, he kicked the ground and dashed toward us. Simultaneously, I unleashed the spell I had been chanting!

"Lighting!"

Normally, it was a simple spell for illumination, but I had tweaked the incantation slightly to reduce the duration to almost zero while cranking the brightness to the absolute maximum!

'Rock' groaned. Beside me, Fried-san looked directly at the light and let out a cry, but I had naturally closed my eyes the moment it flared, escaping the effects!

"Blam Blazer!"

Chanting the spell as I circled to his side, I fired at the staggering 'Rock.' A shockwave of blue light was born in the darkness! This, too, was a spell that dealt direct damage to the spirit! With Rock blinded by the light, intercepting this should have been impossible!!

With a sound like a violent surge of water, my blue light was torn apart!

"No way!"

With a roar, 'Rock' brought down a hand-chop that split my unavoidable strike, causing it to burst and vanish.

"...No way..."

I was actually speechless. He had definitely been blinded. Despite that, he had intercepted my spell with such precision.

"Is that all, little girl!" It was Aldion's voice, sounding triumphant.

This was getting bad.

"Ugh... Lina-dono, what is happening...?"

Fried-san was also blinded and flustered because I had launched the light without warning to keep the element of surprise.

"Naive!"

With Aldion's shout, 'Rock' spun around and brought down a magically charged hand-chop with unerring accuracy!

Flash!

It couldn't be helped. At this rate, I had to—I started chanting a spell under my breath.

"Then it is our turn," Aldion said. Immediately after:

"Icicle Lance!"

A spear of cold air, launched with Rock's voice, pierced the night air. The target wasn't me, but Fried-san! I took a large leap to the side and—

"Gubuehh!"

I tackled Fried-san in the side, grabbing him and shoving him out of the way! The cold air streaked right behind me, grazing my cloak. Keeping my momentum as I ran, I activated the spell I had been chanting!

"Raywing!"

I wrapped myself in a barrier of wind, using the high-speed flight spell to blast off at a low altitude!

"Li... Lina-dono, where are we going?"

"We're leaving this spot for now!" I answered, looking straight ahead, as Fried-san realized what was happening.

While this spell seemed convenient at first glance, it was actually difficult to control, and the sum of weight, speed, and altitude was proportional to the caster's skill. Since I was carrying Fried-san, I had to fly at a ground-hugging altitude to gain any speed. If I looked away for a second, I was liable to slam into a house or a tree.

"But we can't leave the spirit of Aldion like this! He said it himself, didn't he? That he's accumulating power. If we leave him be, eventually—!"

"I know! I'm just making it look like we're running away!"

I was speaking loudly, but because of the wind barrier around us, the opponent couldn't hear me. I left the village as I was, then changed my trajectory a bit further out, circling back toward the village from the side.

I deactivated the spell and landed in an area a bit away from the houses, where trees and shrubs grew haphazardly. I crouched down behind a low thicket to hide.

"By the way, do you think that's true, Lina-dono?" Fried-san asked in a hushed voice.

"What is?"

"The story about Aldion contracting with Rock. Given the tyrant's personality in the legends, he doesn't seem like the type to do something as peaceful as a 'contract.' Could he have possessed him, taken over his body, and be making him say that with Rock's voice?"

"I can't say for sure, but either way, we just have to deal with Aldion's ghost. Even if they really did make a contract, if the King's ghost disappears, the power he granted will disappear too. More than that, what bothered me was the innkeeper's reaction."

"The innkeeper?"

"Yeah. He knew King Aldion was possessing Rock, and he said something like, 'I'd appreciate it if you didn't do anything too violent.' Aldion even told him not to worry. If Aldion's ghost were binding the villagers through some spell or fear, that kind of conversation wouldn't happen. So, I'm wondering what exactly the relationship is between Aldion and the villagers. Depending on the situation, we might even be able to get the villagers to cooperate..."

In the darkness, under the light of the moon and stars, Fried-san was looking at me. It seemed his vision had finally recovered.

"That's enough of your pathetic schemes."

At the sound of that familiar voice, Fried-san reflexively stood up. Since it had come to this, there was no point in me staying hidden alone.

As I stood up after him, I saw a single figure standing in the night, bathed in moonlight.

"—Aldion...!"

At Fried-san's murmur, the composite 'Rock'—the dwelling place of Aldion and Rock—wore a fearless smirk.

"Im... Impossible! How did you know we were here!"

"You were lucky. Though it was bad luck for your side," Rock's voice replied to the flustered Fried-san. "You flew away, didn't you? That's quite a convenient spell. I

chased after you, but I was shaken off immediately. It seemed pointless to pursue any further, so I gave up."

"You gave up that fast?!"

Ignoring my retort, he continued. "Since I had no choice, I was doing my daily jog when I happened to hear your whispering here."

"...Wait... 'daily jog'?"

Our voices harmonized at the sound of something so unexpectedly healthy.

"Exactly!" 'Rock' nodded with total confidence.

I argued with him right then and there. "I told you! Four years ago, I made a contract with the King on the condition that he would give me power if I obeyed him! So, just as promised, I've been listening to what the King says. Morning and night, I haven't missed a single day of basic training—running, push-ups, sit-ups, back extensions—and studying magic!"

"Wait, 'power' just meant boosting your basic stats?!"

Fried and I shouted in unison.

"Hold on, just a minute," Fried stammered, looking bewildered. "The power a King bestows... isn't it supposed to be, well, more like... something where you don't even have to practice? Something where you don't even use a spell, but just by wishing for it, you unleash some tremendous latent ability... or something like that?"

Aldion's voice rang out, sounding utterly exasperated. "What are you talking about? As if such a convenient power exists. We aren't pure demons, after all. If you call yourself a mage, you should realize that much with a little thought."

"...Yeah... you're right... my bad..." Fried muttered, actually apologizing.

"So... that means those movements during the fight at the inn were just Rock's actual skills?" I asked.

"Indeed. I lent a little help, but from my perspective, Rock still needs much more training. I told you before, didn't I? Rock is still in the middle of accumulating power."

So "accumulating power" just meant he was in the middle of a special training regime! I had completely assumed he was building up supernatural energy through some suspicious ritual or curse...

"Th-then what did you do to the villagers?!" Fried asked, recovering his composure. "You spoke as if they already knew about your resurrection!"

"Of course they all know," Rock replied this time. "They know I dug up the coffin. Like I said, I wanted to leave the village in the first place. But when I thought about it, even if I gained magic and physical strength under Aldion's coaching, a tyrant is only a tyrant because of his authority. Without power, I'd just be the strongest guy in the village."

Whether they heard our whispering or not, Rock and Aldion continued speaking alternately.

"For now, it's fine if they keep making fun of me—no, of *us*. When I finally gain enough power, I'll just have to make the whole village realize the truth."

"Come to think of it," Aldion added, "the ornaments my body was wearing were taken by the village chief four years ago as a punishment for desecrating the coffin. I'll have to have those returned eventually. With plenty of interest, of course."

"That's right. After that, I'll leave this village behind and do things that only I can do in the wide world. Until I made the contract with the King, I did nothing but complain without helping with village chores. But since then, I've been diligent in my training and studies. The villagers' reaction is generally: 'His speech and behavior have gone weird since he got possessed, but he's working hard, so let's cut him some slack.'"

"They're that laid-back?!" I blurted out.

"Precisely," Aldion declared. "Since the time isn't ripe yet, I cannot overlook the fact that you returned to the village specifically because you feared my existence."

"Lina-san—"

Fried whispered to me while keeping his eyes on the man. A deep smile was etched onto "Rock's" face as he made his declaration. Fried groaned softly.

"I'm starting to feel like it might be okay even if we just leave him be..."

"I’m starting to feel that way too..."

"...Just so you know, don't expect any combat support from me."

"I know. I'll handle things here, so just stay back so you don't get caught up!"

With that, Fried shook the bushes and distanced himself.

Handle things, huh?

"—Lina-san, I take back what I said. If he’s inherited the tyrant’s ambitions too, he might not be a problem now, but he’ll eventually do something reckless."

"Yeah. Be careful!"

True. If he was planning to take revenge on the villagers who neglected him—completely ignoring the reasons *why* they neglected him—I couldn't just leave him alone.

"Understood. But the problem is how to do it."

If I just wanted to vaporize Rock, it would be simple. I could just blast a spell with an indiscriminate wide area of effect, like the Dragon Slave. However, there was a possibility that Rock's body was being completely controlled and he was just being forced to speak. Even if he truly was teaming up with the King and inflating his ambitions with Aldion’s help, he hadn't actually committed any major crimes yet. In that case, if I could just deal with the King's ghost, he might change his mind—or at least stop thinking about doing anything too grand.

Perhaps taking my monologue as a request for cooperation, Fried spoke up in a timid tone.

"I... I'll say this now, but don't count on me for combat support."

"I know! I'll manage, so just stay back!"

I decided to go for it. I would blow him away without further questions!

"Explosion Array!"

I chanted the spell in a low, fast voice. It was a spell that sent soil and debris flying upward from right under the opponent's feet. It wouldn't cause fatal wounds, and it

was difficult to dodge if you didn't notice it. After making him unable to move, I would cast a purification spell to erase only the ghost!

But.

Thud!

After the debris that seemed to have swallowed "Rock" settled, a single figure remained standing just a short distance away.

He dodged that!

I had fired that shot in the middle of his sentence. It shouldn't have been easy to read and avoid.

"Then, from my side—"

"Rock" spoke as he began chanting a spell.

"Freeze Arrow!"

He unleashed five or six arrows of cold air toward me! But that was amateur work! I jumped high to dodge, and the ice arrows either froze the branches of the shrubs or vanished into the darkness. While I was in the air, I began chanting my next spell, using the shadows of the trees to circle around. Aiming for the figure of "Rock" visible in the moonlight, I launched my counterattack.

"Rock" ran toward me, sensing my location while fending off my spell. Of course, I had no obligation to engage him at his preferred distance. I tried to widen the gap.

What?! He was circling around to face me again? Why?

It was nothing complicated. It simply wasn't a human feat.

I finally realized. When the canopy of trees blocked the moonlight, it was almost pitch black. What I had just done wasn't just pushing back his spell with a strong wind. I had captured the presence following behind me and timed my move.

"Freeze Arrow!"

I heard "Rock's" voice again! Simultaneously, I turned around and released the spell I had completed.

"Windy Shield!"

It was just a spell to create a strong wind, but it was all about how you used it. The wind I released while running blew back every single one of the ice arrows "Rock" had fired.

However.

Was he reading my moves? Even so, his reactions were too precise.

"Urgh."

"Did you trip on a hole?"

Rock and Aldion spoke at once as he pulled out a foot that had sunk slightly into the ground.

Slap! A light sound echoed, and the shadow dashed toward me! No way! I hurriedly turned on my heel and ran. Whether by luck or skill, he had dodged all the reflected ice arrows, which was impressive enough. It was dark and I couldn't see clearly, but I could make out the moving shadow. And then...

Just before dodging, I had picked up a branch and thrown it at "Rock," letting the wind carry it.

"I've got you figured out!"

It didn't matter if I missed. I just wanted to distract him, or if I was lucky, knock him out. That light "slap" sound was likely him swatting the branch away. But how did he do that in this darkness?! He could track my location by my presence, sure. but to accurately see and intercept a branch flying through the dark with no presence at all... that wasn't a human feat.

What was this inconsistency? "Rock" talked way too much during the fight and fell for my provocations, and his attack patterns were simple and unrefined. He was like a beginner who just happened to know attack spells. Yet, when it came to defense, he was performing master-level feats like intercepting things without relying on his eyes. It was hard to judge if he was a novice or a veteran... but then it clicked.

I shouted as I leapt from under the trees into the moonlight.

"The one 'watching' the surroundings in the dark or when blinded... that's not Rock, it's you, Aldion!"

"Ho. You noticed?"

Along with the voice, "Rock" emerged from the trees. In the darkness, his eyes seemed to glow with a faint light.

"I don't know how a ghost sees things... but at least, it probably doesn't matter to you if it's too bright or too dark. I don't know if you're sharing a body or what, but you can directly tell Rock what you 'see' as a spirit. That's why 'Rock' can respond accurately to my attacks even when blinded by light or in the pitch black!"

"You figured it out well."

Even after I revealed his secret, his tone remained composed.

"But even if you know that, what can you do about it?"

He was right. Even knowing the trick... damn it. I thought revealing it with such confidence would shake him up a bit.

"——Understood, Lina-san."

Suddenly, a voice echoed. It was Fried, still hidden somewhere.

"In other words, if we can distract Aldion, we can manage, right?"

"Well, yeah, technically..."

"Ho. A mere human who can do nothing but hide in the shadows thinks he can do something to me? Interesting. Try it if you can—"

"Everyone looks at the stars in the sky. No one tries to look at me."

Fried suddenly started reciting something like a sleep-talker, and "Rock's" movements froze instantly.

"What?! You... how do you know that?!"

"W-what's wrong, King Aldion?! Please calm down!"

Aldion and Rock were both in a panic. Fried's voice continued to ring out clearly!

"So you still remember? I've been researching you for years, and in the process, I found it. The embarrassing, adolescent-style diary full of self-reflection and self-reproach that you kept secret from your vassals and family! It was so hilarious I memorized the whole thing, and I’m going to recite it right here, right now!"

"Stop it …aaaaaaaaah!"

Aldion screamed. His agitation must have confused their senses, because "Rock’s" body began to wobble.

"King Aldion! Calm down! King Aldion!"

Rock’s words did nothing to soothe the King.

"Oh. Come to think of it, there was also a diary entry where the King compared himself to a single flower he saw in the mountains. Reading that actually made me say 'Yikes' out loud. If I recall—"

"Stop! Anything but that one!"

At Fried’s mocking voice, the King’s confusion only deepened.

...Uh, okay. I don't really know what's happening, but this looks like a chance.

".....Elmekia Lance!"

"Gugyabaaaaaaaaaah?!"

"Lighting!"

The strike I unleashed hit the King dead-on this time, with pathetic ease. The magical light I released clung to the treetops, pushing back the surrounding darkness. The light revealed Rock lying flat on his back on the ground.

"Is it over...?"

Fried appeared from nowhere and stopped a short distance away from Rock, muttering to himself.

"Yeah. Definitely," I nodded.

"Rock" had gone down easily after taking my spell, but considering the possibility that the damage was split between Rock and Aldion, I decided to fire the same spell three more times at the fallen man, just to be safe.

I blasted a handful of rounds in. With that ghost illuminated and gone, the King’s evil spirit was completely extinguished. Rock might be out cold for a few days, but his life wasn't in any danger. The power he gained through his special training would surely remain, but now that he’d lost his "brain trust"—or rather, his instigator—he shouldn't be doing anything reckless. As for his future treatment, I figured it was only fair to leave that to the local village chief.

And so, the ghost of the tyrant revived in the modern age saw his ambitions crumble. However, a question lingered in my mind. I looked toward Fried, who was standing still, and asked, "I've been meaning to ask... why did Ardion freak out so much the moment you said you'd talk about the contents of the diary?"

Fried looked off into the far, far distance. "It is difficult to explain to the young Miss Lina... let’s see. Perhaps you should try keeping a diary yourself, Miss Lina. Then, read it ten years from now. If you do that, you might understand about half of how the King felt."

".....If you say so," I replied with a non-committal nod, but I realized the truth. Fried must have had a similar experience himself. Looking up at the sky where the dawn had yet to break, I firmly swore in my heart that I would never keep a diary for as long as I lived.

(The Resurrected King: Finished)

Pursuit! Dollmaster

After several explosions and flashes of light erupted, the darkness did not return to its original state.

"——Light!"

The night forest, once ruled by shadows, was pushed back by the magical energy I produced. Small fires still flickered on the withered trees here and there, their orange glow illuminating the groaning bandits scattered about. In the midst of it all, my figure emerged in the light—clad in a black cloak and shoulder guards, looking every bit the sorceress. I wondered how I looked to those fallen bandits.

".....You... who are you...?" one of the nearby bandits groaned, twitching.

This was me, Lina Inverse. During my travels, I occasionally made a hobby (and a profit, and a stress-reliever) out of beating down bandits and confiscating their treasures. But that wasn't my goal today. ——Well, of course, I planned to confiscate the treasure since I was already here.

I pulled a doll from my robe, held it up, and asked, "You guys. You recognize this doll, don't you?"

The twisted branches representing its arms and legs were of uneven length and thickness; it barely managed to look human. The bandit stared intently at the doll before asking, "......What is that gross thing...?"

"Don't call it gross! Fireball!"

BOOM!

An attack spell I fired on impulse caused another flower of flame to bloom in the night forest.

The trouble started a few days ago. The moment I wrote my name in the inn's ledger, the innkeeper asked me with sparkling eyes, "What?! Is your name Lina Inverse?!"

I instinctively recoiled. "Heh—so you're the one!" "Whoa, is it really her? For real?" "Now that you mention it, there is a resemblance."

People started chiming in, and some even began to pray to me.

"Eh? Wait, what? What's going on?" I asked, feeling bewildered.

It's nothing but a boast, but when you're a genius beautiful sorceress traveling the world like I am, rumors tend to spread. That said, I am strictly a sorceress, not a saint. I have plenty of heroic tales about things like dragons stepping aside to let me pass or being a "Robber's Killer," but I didn't recall doing anything that would make people pray to me...

The innkeeper replied with a smile, "Look, didn't you notice it when you walked in the front door? We have that strange, ugly doll displayed out there."

It gave off an indescribable vibe, and seeing it dyed in the colors of the sunset made it look like nothing but a cursed doll. When I answered, the innkeeper beamed. "That's the Lina Inverse doll, modeled after you!"

I felt a vein pop in my temple. "Wait just a minute!" I snapped at the old man. "Setting everything else aside! First of all! What do you mean by saying it has a 'resemblance' AND is 'strange and ugly' at the same time?!"

The innkeeper hurriedly waved his hands. "No, no! I'm not saying you look like the doll! It's, well, a resemblance... or more like the general atmosphere? Of course, the real person is much cuter!"

I gave a grand nod and then questioned him again. "What exactly is that doll? Why is it in front of the inn, and why is everyone so grateful for it?"

"Huh? What, you're the person herself and you don't know?" The innkeeper's eyes went wide, and then he said proudly, "That is a Lina Inverse doll infused with 'bandit-repelling magic.'"

".....Bandit-repelling magic?"

I frowned at the absurdity. The innkeeper continued, "A while back, we started seeing bandits around here. This is such a small village, so we don't have soldiers. While everyone was worried, a person who said they were from the Sorcerers' Guild in Lefora came by and sold us those dolls with the repelling magic for a cheap price.

Since then, we haven't seen a single bandit. It's been incredibly effective. We're truly grateful."

".....H-huh..... so that's how it was."

While I gave a polite response, I was fuming inside. Obviously, it was a scam. There is no such thing as "bandit-repelling magic." There are spells that vary in effectiveness based on race or gender, but there isn't a spell that targets someone based on their profession. Bandits are criminals, not a biological species.

Based on the atmosphere, it seemed quite a few villagers had bought the dolls. The materials were just things picked up off the ground. The production cost was basically nothing but labor. The doll seller must have made quite a profit. However, even as I realized this...

"——Well, charms have a certain level of effect but they aren't absolute, and sometimes the magic wears off after a while. You shouldn't rely only on that; everyone should stay cautious," I said, playing along with the innkeeper and the villagers.

It would be easy to point out they were being tricked. But given the mood, they wouldn't believe me right away. Besides, if I explained it and they did believe me, I had a feeling their anger might turn toward me for having my name used.

So I let it slide for the moment. But of course, I had no intention of letting someone who mocked me like this go free. While keeping a smile on my face in front of everyone, I firmly swore to track down the doll seller and make them regret it until the day they died!

And so, I began my investigation. First, I had to identify the culprit. When I asked the villagers, I learned the man dressed as a sorcerer wore a cloak and pulled his hood down low, so all they knew was that he was a dark-haired man in his thirties or forties with a tired face.

Information on the "bandits" was even scarcer. All I found out was that there were about three guys who looked like thugs. Regarding their faces, the witnesses said, "I didn't have the luxury of looking that closely." It’s true; if an average person sees a bandit in the mountains, they’re going to get out of there rather than observe them.

While I knew there were at least three of them, I had no clues to track their path. So, I began visiting the surrounding villages one by one, asking if bandits had been seen or

if dolls were being sold. I bet on the fact that since the doll sellers were profiting by exploiting the residents' fears, they wouldn't target towns large enough to have a permanent guard.

Of course, if I heard rumors of bandits while moving between villages, I went and beat them half to death. After asking if they knew anything about the doll seller, I didn't forget to confiscate their treasure.

I wiped out three or four bandit groups, but none of them were involved in the doll incident. As I continued my investigation and annihilation, I started to see a general pattern of where they were moving. After that, it was just a matter of going to the village they were likely to target next and asking if there had been any talk of bandits nearby.

And then—"If it's bandits you're looking for, my son said he saw some."

That answer came at a small eatery in a village called Melzuzu.

"Really?" I stopped eating my lunch of chicken and turnip cream stew and looked at the old man sitting next to me.

The old man tilted a mug of fruit liquor to his lips, his face flushed red. "The other day, when my son went to the eastern mountain to gather firewood. Luckily, they didn't seem to notice him, so he made it back safely."

I turned my chair toward him. "I see. When exactly was 'the other day'?"

"Hmm..... four days ago, I reckon."

"And what did they look like? How many were there?"

"My son said he saw three of them. He didn't hear the details of their outfits, but he said they definitely didn't look like honest folk."

"Thanks! Bullseye! —Hey, ma'am! Another drink for this gentleman! My treat!" I ordered a drink for the old man as a thank-you.

The culprits would show shadows of bandits to stoke the villagers' fear, and then come to sell the dolls. In other words…

If I stayed in this village for a while, that doll peddler was bound to show up. I burned with fighting spirit, imagining the day he would crawl out—a day that surely wasn't far off.

I pulled the infamous doll out from under my cloak.

"By creating a space that bandits want to avoid, the probability of an attack is significantly reduced! Just by placing this Lina Inverse doll at your entrance, the 'Inverse Zone' generated around it will shut out persistent bandits! Normally, this would be worth a gold coin, but right now, it's—"

"How much?"

That moment came sooner than I expected. It was the second day of my stay at the inn in Melzuuz.

"Take back your peaceful nights!"

Returning from a bored stroll to kill time, I found a small crowd gathered near the inn. With a premonition in my chest, I headed toward them. Since it was a small village, the "crowd" was fewer than ten people. Through the gaps between them, I saw a dark figure standing ahead.

"But everyone, rest assured. With my magical skills, protecting this village from bandits is the simplest of tasks!"

The one shouting was a middle-aged man. The edges of the cloak covering his body were embroidered with white thread. From under the hood pulled low over his eyes, I could see black hair and a gaunt face. It matched the description I'd heard perfectly. Keeping his face tilted down, the man continued his sales pitch.

"But... it definitely seems like some kind of spell is on it. I can feel a sinister aura or something..."

"But... magical items are expensive, aren't they?"

At an old woman's murmur, the figure in mage robes smiled as if he'd gotten exactly what he wanted.

"That concern is quite natural. It is common knowledge that ordinary magic items are expensive. Some are worth enough to let you live in luxury for a lifetime. However!

This Lina Inverse doll has achieved an exceptional price through mass production using revolutionary technology at the Ruforth Mage Guild!"

I cut in from the side. The man raised his face slightly and finally noticed me—a figure in mage robes standing at the back of the crowd. His eyes, though not large, widened. Apparently, he hadn't expected a professional mage to be in a village of this size. His cheek twitched visibly.

"O-Oh, well, if you've hired a mage for protection, then perhaps a guardian doll is unnecessary. Hahaha."

He was likely on guard, thinking his lie might be exposed, but for him, the situation was much worse. I continued.

"I inquired with the Ruforth Mage Guild, and they said they aren't making any such dolls."

"What!?"

The man and the surrounding villagers shouted simultaneously. My claim of inquiring with the Ruforth Mage Guild was a total lie, of course. However, since there was no doubt the bandit-repelling doll was a fake, there was no need to actually ask.

The villagers began snapping at the man.

"Wait, it's a misunderstanding!" the man yelled. "I said 'those from the Ruforth Mage Guild'! I didn't say the Guild itself officially authorized and manufactured the dolls!"

It was a pathetic excuse. Regardless, once something is deemed suspicious, it's over. The villagers dispersed here and there, grumbling. Only the man and I remained. After a period of silence, I spoke.

"If you'd apologized honestly, that would be one thing, but making stupid excuses at this stage..."

"W-Who are you... interfering with a person's business like this...?"

The man asked with forced bravado. I gave him a cold look and smirked.

"The name's Lina Inverse. Does that clarify the situation?"

The moment I introduced myself, the man shook like a leaf. He broke into a greasy sweat, his eyes darting around.

"N-No, it's a misunderstanding. I didn't just use your name for the doll without permission. According to legends in my hometown, there's a monster in the mountains called a 'Linain Verse,' and they say it eats bad children head-first—"

"Liar!"

I shouted and chased after him! The man bolted toward the east end of the village street. I say "bolted," but his footing was unsteady due to agitation and fear.

I could have easily caught him if I ran seriously, but that would be a problem. My goal was to flush him out and have him lead me to his accomplices. I could have caught him and forced a confession, but this way was faster.

The man eventually left the village and entered a mountain path, glancing back occasionally with stumbling steps. I followed at a moderate distance, making it look like I was in full pursuit. After a while on the mountain path, the man suddenly shouted.

"Run! I've been spotted by someone dangerous!"

Startled birds took flight from the treetops. Tsk! He's trying to let his friends escape? How surprisingly noble! In that case, I'll catch at least this guy first!

I picked up my pace, chanting a spell under my breath. Timing it right, I aimed at the man's back.

"Freeze Arrow!"

Cold arrows of ice shot through the air. They were meant to stop his feet. In fact, if he hadn't jumped aside, his toes would have been frozen. The dozen or so streaks of cold air struck tree trunks or the ground, freezing the empty space and leaving white frost.

But those hadn't been fired by me.

I bit my lip inwardly. I recognized the voice that had just cast the spell. And then!

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

The expected stupid laughter echoed through the trees!

"It seems something has happened, Haidar Pajyat! But! Now that I, Naga the White Serpent, have come to help, there is no need for worry!"

I knew it!

Holding my head in my hands, I looked toward the source. Beyond the mountain trees, right next to the doll peddler named Haidar, a single shadow appeared. Long black hair, a black cloak, spiked shoulder guards, and a skull necklace around her neck! With her excessively revealing clothes—yes! It was the woman who called herself my rival, whose very existence was incomprehensible, and who spent from morning till night being a total nuisance: Naga the White Serpent!

After saying her piece, she finally noticed my presence and blinked.

"Oh, look who it is. If it isn't Lina. What a coincidence to meet here."

Without hesitation, I blasted the spell I'd prepared for the man directly at Naga.

"Honestly... what do you think you're doing, attacking so suddenly? Violent as always, Lina..."

Naga had taken my spell head-on and been frozen solid. I had no choice but to thaw her out to get the story. Beside us, Haidar was staring wide-eyed at her immortality, but of course, I wasn't surprised by that anymore.

I'd heard that someone had spotted these people in the mountains and said they didn't look like honest folk. Apparently, Naga had been included in that assessment. Well, she certainly doesn't look like an honest citizen... but I didn't think she'd be involved in *this* direction.

I glared at the thawed Naga with a cold gaze.

"Don't 'violent as always' me! You were using my name on those weird dolls and selling them without permission, weren't you?"

"Hmph. That is a misunderstanding, Lina. You lot! Come out!"

At Naga's call, after a short pause, two men emerged from deep within the trees. Both had messy hair, scruffy beards, wore tattered leather armor, and had a single

sword at their waists. They looked like bandits no matter how you sliced it. They approached cautiously, stopping a short distance from us next to Haidar.

"U-Um... Miss Naga, you just called that person 'Lina.' Does that mean...?"

One of the thugs asked. Naga puffed out her chest for some reason.

"Yes. This is the Lina Inverse whose name you used for the dolls."

The two screamed simultaneously and scrambled to make excuses.

"I-It's not what it looks like! In our hometown's legends, there's a monster in the mountains called a Linain Verse!"

"They say it crunches up bad children from the head down!"

"We just took the name from that!"

They gave the exact same excuse as Haidar. ...Wait, does that legend actually exist? Naga gestured toward the three of them.

"I happened to learn that these three were starting a revolutionary business, and I've been cooperating as an advisor who actually knows the real Lina!"

".....By the way..."

One of the thugs rummaged in his shirt.

"This is what they looked like before Miss Naga gave us advice."

He held out a doll. I looked at it. Oh. It was cute. It was crudely made, but it clearly looked like a girl. The sewn cloth was stuffed, and you could tell some effort had gone into it. If you asked if it was worth two silver coins, it was a bit of a stretch, but as a doll for children, it was... well, barely a passing grade.

"---Hey, wait a minute! Why did it get creepier *after* you gave advice!?"

I snapped at Naga. Comparing the "before" and "after," the difference in appearance and effort was obvious. Naga puffed out her chest.

"Hmph! A foolish question, Lina! Can't you tell? The first one clearly lacked impact! Besides, making those took too much time and money!"

"So in the end, it was about the money!"

"The pursuit of profit is natural in business!"

"Business? You're joking! Wandering around dressed as bandits to make the villagers anxious, then selling them useless dolls as magic items! That's not business, it's a scam!"

"T-That's not true...!"

Surprisingly, it wasn't Naga who spoke, but Haidar, who had been hovering in the background. Despite his timid attitude, he spoke up.

"I-I can't let a claim of 'scamming' slide! After all, I haven't told a single lie! For instance, these two!"

He pointed to his two companions.

"Having them dress like this is strictly for safety! If we run into real bandits during our travels, they might think we're in the same trade and leave us alone! By the way, the swords are just fakes made from wooden sticks!"

To match Haidar's story, the two "bandits" removed the swords from their waists. One pulled on the hilt and scabbard to show it wouldn't unsheathe, and the other threw his on the ground. If it were steel, it would have made a metallic *clink*, but the sound that echoed was a light *clatter*. It seemed they really were just sticks.

I kept a suspicious gaze on Haidar.

"...Hmm... I thought for sure you'd had some trouble with the Ruforth Mage Guild and started this petty scam with these two drifters to ruin the Guild's name while making some pocket change. But I guess I was wrong."

"I-I-I'm not! T-True, I'll admit I had some issues with that Guild in the past... but how much do you know!?"

He hurriedly tried to explain himself. I had just been guessing, but he was quite easy to read.

"A-Anyway!"

Did I hit the mark? Perhaps he had a guilty conscience, because without waiting for my reply, Haidar continued—

The doll master pressed his point. "The product's name is 'Magic Item: Lina Inverse Doll'—and 'Magic Item' is strictly part of the brand name, not a description of the product's nature! I said I mass-produced them with breakthrough technology, but I never said I used sorcery!"

"Then what about that 'Inverse Zone' or the 'Brigand Repellent' effect? Those don't actually exist, do they?"

"Wh-What? Hah! How naive! Look at this!" With those words, Haidar whipped his cloak open with a flourish.

...Nothing actually happened just because he flipped his cloak, though.

"I said, look at this!" He flipped the hem of the cloak again. "The edge of the cloak! There's white thread embroidery there, isn't there?"

"There is, but what about—ah!?" I finally noticed it and let out a startled cry. I had assumed the white stitching on the edge of the cloak was just a design. But it wasn't a mere pattern. Usually, these things are highly stylized and look like decorations at a glance, but if I looked closely, they were definitely ordinary characters.

Disclaimer: These are individual impressions. Product effects are not guaranteed.

"A... caution label...?"

"Fuhahaha! Exactly!" Haidar flipped his cloak yet again and let out a triumphant laugh. "My sales pitch might have included some slightly misleading expressions, but while I was giving my speech, this boldly written disclaimer was displayed right in front of the customer's eyes! To misunderstand the nature of the product without reading it, and then call me a fraud... it's laughable!"

"And that’s how it is, Lina!" Naga puffed out her chest grandly. "Meaaaanning! This business is by no means a scam!"

"IT IS A SCAAAAM!" I screamed at the top of my lungs at their overconfident, delusional claims. I pointed a finger sharply at Naga. "Even if—by some miracle—every single person in the world agreed it wasn't a scam, I still wouldn't forgive you for spreading my name around on those creepy dolls without my permission!"

Naga brushed her hair back with a composed expression as I burned with rage. "Oh, you're so narrow-minded. Well then, let's do this. In the spirit of mutual support, I'll allow you to use my name for business too! Like 'Naga Crackers'!"

"Like that would ever work! What kind of value does your name even have!?"

At my retort, Naga's cheek twitched. "...Hoho. I take it that means you're picking a fight with me?"

"The opposite. I'm saying I'm accepting the fight you already started."

"It seems we won't be able to reach an understanding on this matter, Lina." Naga took a stance, and I widened my stance slightly, ready for battle.

"It's not just 'this matter.' I don't plan on ever reaching an understanding with you on anything."

The incantations for our spells flowed through the quiet mountains.

"Ngyaaaaaaah!?"

Three screams overlapped and echoed through the trees. Haidar and the two men dressed as bandits fled, and as if chasing after them—Boom! Crackle! Snap!—the sounds of offensive magic exploding rolled down the mountain.

I continued my offensive and defensive struggle with Naga while chasing Haidar and the others. However, with so many obstacles like trees, I couldn't land a finishing blow. Haidar and the two men were slightly ahead of us, running down a gentle slope that didn't even have a mountain trail. Suddenly, they shouted and stopped in their tracks. Just as I wondered what happened—

"Oh! You're the one from back then!" I heard an unfamiliar voice.

I took in the situation. The place where Haidar and the others stood was a well-trodden path. It seemed that while we were running haphazardly through the mountains, we had stumbled onto a highway. And apparently, someone passing by that highway knew Haidar.

"Lina!"

It went without saying—that was the sound of Naga and me continuing our exchange of spells. Honestly, I didn't feel like I'd lose to Naga, but even if I defeated her, it would be pointless if Haidar and the others escaped.

"Wait a second, Naga. It looks like they ran into an acquaintance." I signaled for Naga to wait as she caught up, and we slowly descended to watch Haidar's situation.

Haidar looked bewildered, seemingly having no idea who the person was. The speaker said happily, "You don't remember? Well, I suppose that's natural. You had a lot of customers. I'm the one who ran the general store in Memmed Village."

"Ah... oh," Haidar replied vaguely.

Naga and I approached the highway and watched quietly. The person was a middle-aged man carrying a pack on his back. Since he mentioned being a shopkeeper, he was probably traveling for supplies. From the man's perspective, Haidar's two companions were clearly visible, but he didn't seem to realize they were shills acting as bandits. He approached Haidar without a hint of suspicion.

"Really, everyone is grateful to you. That Lina Inverse doll you sold us is incredibly effective!"

"...Huh?"

While we all furrowed our brows, the man continued in high spirits. "To be honest, everyone was skeptical at first about whether a charm like that would work. I mean, for a magic item, it was way too cheap. We bought them half-doubting, just looking for some peace of mind. But after we put the dolls out, we stopped seeing bandits nearby! A lot of people thought it might just be a coincidence, but it wasn't. Your dolls really are amazing!"

"How... how were they amazing?" I asked, peeking out from the side.

The man spoke excitedly. "How? Listen and be amazed! Around the time bandits started appearing near the village, we petitioned the Lord, and recently, the soldiers finally arrived!"

At the word "soldiers," Haidar and his cronies flinched for a moment, but the man didn't notice. "And then! Those soldiers said that when they investigated the surrounding mountains, all the bandits that had been around here were completely gone!"

Hearing that, my jaw dropped.

While I had been wandering around looking for Haidar, I had wiped out several groups of bandits I ran into. I hadn't destroyed every single bandit in the area, but the ones who survived probably sensed the dangerous atmosphere and cleared out.

The man continued toward the stunned group. "At this point, you can't think of it as anything other than the effect of your dolls, right? You chased the villains away from the whole area, not just houses or villages! When I told the soldiers about your dolls, even they were impressed. They said they'd even like to adopt them for the military. If you like, why don't you try selling them to the Lord next time?"

"Even... even the soldiers heard about those dolls...?" I leaned weakly against a nearby tree.

"Well, I just wanted to tell you that everyone is grateful. Truly, thank you. I'll be out of your way then." With that, the man passed Haidar and the others and walked off down the highway.

The group watched his retreating back. Eventually, Haidar and his two companions looked at each other.

"Does this mean... they're happy with what we did?"

"So, in the end, it was a good thing?"

"LIKE HELL IT WAS A GOOD THING!"

I dashed forward at full speed and my flying kick slammed directly into Haidar's face. Naga frowned at me.

"What are you so angry about? The customers are happy, so isn't it fine?"

"That's not how logic works! Don't you see? If this keeps up, the rumors about those dolls will spread everywhere! In other words, everyone will misunderstand and think Lina Inverse looks just like those creepy, weird dolls!"

I wanted to prevent that situation at all costs, but no matter how I looked at it, it seemed too late. It also pissed me off that my own bandit-thrashing had helped spread the story, but putting that aside!

"Heh... hehehe... If it's come to this... there's only one thing left to do..."

I glared at Naga, Haidar, and the others, my aura of rage flaring. Their faces twitched with terror.

"I'm going to make you all regret this so much you'll wish you were dead, right here and now, so you never try a stunt like this again!"

With that declaration, I began chanting an attack spell without further hesitation.

Later, a rumor spread in a certain region that the shape of a mountain had changed overnight. Whether those strange dolls are still placed under the eaves of the houses in the nearby villages... I do not know.

(Pursuit! Dollmaster: Finished)

Fearful Idle Gossip

"Um, you dropped this."

I turned around at the sound of a voice from behind me and saw a woman standing there. From her clothes, she looked like a townsperson, likely in her early twenties. She was beautiful, but she looked terribly exhausted, with a lifeless expression and long black hair falling messily over her forehead.

"Ah!"

In her outstretched right hand was a small lump wrapped in cloth. I quickly checked my belongings.

I, Lina Inverse—the beautiful, genius sorceress—had been asked to exterminate a nearby Ogre in this town of Quolve. I had just finished that task and was on my way back. During the fight, perhaps a claw had grazed me, or for some other reason, one of the pouches hanging from my belt had torn, and its contents were gone. It was a magical potion in a small vial. The price was enough to buy a modest house. I had wrapped it in cloth to keep the glass from breaking, and the bundle the woman was holding was exactly that. Thanks to the cloth, the contents seemed safe, but it probably hadn't made much sound when it fell, which is why I hadn't noticed.

I received the parcel from the woman while offering my thanks. "Man, you really saved me. Thanks a lot, seriously."

"No, no, don't mention it. It was no trouble at all if it helped you out," she replied with a bright smile.

"Well, for now, I guess I'll go report the completion of my quest to the mayor. Oh, right. I haven't introduced myself yet. I’m Lina. Lina Inverse."

"And I’m June Riceliver," she said, beaming at me.

"Oh..."

But then she tilted her head. "More importantly, are you by any chance the sorceress the mayor asked to take care of the ogre?"

Even though it was a town, Quolve wasn't that big. Rumors about a traveling female sorceress taking on an ogre slaying must have spread fast. When she asked, I nodded. "Yeah. Actually, I just finished wrapping that up quite easily."

"What, already?! That’s amazing! Um... if you’d like, would you care to join me for a meal and tell me some stories of your travels? Oh, no, of course, I’ll provide the food!"

"Eh? Is that okay? You already found my lost item, and now a meal on top of that?"

"Of course! If you’re willing, that is."

Honestly, I wasn't in a hurry to get anywhere, and receiving a meal as thanks for finding a pricey magical reagent sounded like a good travel memory.

The moment I entered the room with June, I couldn't help but let out a cry of admiration. Food and tableware were set out on a long table, and the light from countless lit candles created an atmosphere overflowing with mood. The dishes looked homemade, but the aroma alone was enough to stir my appetite.

"Please, have a seat over there," June said with a smile, gesturing toward a chair.

After parting ways with June during the day, I had finished my report to the mayor and collected my reward. We had arranged to meet again at dinner time, and I had made my way to her house. The home she led me to was a newly built one, though not particularly large. Apparently, they had moved to this town recently due to her husband's work. It seemed her husband was away in another town on business today as well. In short, she probably just wanted someone to talk to to kill time, but I figured this sort of thing wasn't bad once in a while.

"How about we talk while we eat?"

"Well then, I'll take you up on that. Time to eat!" I started by serving myself a modest portion of salad onto my plate. "So, there are all sorts of travel stories, but what kind would you like to hear?"

When I asked if she had any requests, she kept her smile and said, "Let's see. To get things moving, how about I start with a story? This is something I heard from an acquaintance of mine."

"It’s a ghost story, so you can relax, right?"

"I mean, that's not the kind of thing you talk about while eating! Some people are bad with scary stories, you know!"

Actually, even though I'm perfectly fine fighting actual evil spirits or vampires, I'm a bit weak when it comes to ghost stories.

"As long as it's not a ghost story..."

She gave a small nod. "...This is a story from when I was a child. My grandmother absolutely loved scary stories and would tell them to me all the time. Whether she liked the white hand reaching out from the lake or something else, we'd go back and forth on it. My parents said if we got along that well, we should just get married... it's true."

"Everything was fine up to that point... it was fine...!" She took a breath and lowered her voice. "But you see, we moved to this town for my husband's work, and when you do that, you have to deal with the neighbors. Especially the 'well-side chats.'"

And so, she began to speak fluently.

"In other words, that person ended up being clung to by an old woman who was supposed to have drowned ten days ago...! June-chan, things like that really happen, don't they? My acquaintance said so. Yes."

As June finished her tale, a chilly silence fell. She lifted herself slightly from her chair, blew out one of the nearby candles with a soft *whoosh*, and said with a smile, "Now. It’s Lina-san’s turn."

"—Wait, so it *is* a ghost story!"

"AAAAAAAAAHH!?"

Finally, my paralysis broke, and I screamed at the top of my lungs. "That's exactly the kind of thing you call a ghost story!"

"Is something wrong? It's all ghost stories, isn't it?"

Well, sure, there are people in the world who like ghost stories, but still! Talking about fish with patterns like human faces, or travelers meeting misfortune after seeing a mysterious village festival... I wasn't even sure if you could call that a "social skill."

"Calling out in the snowy mountains? No. But you see, if I talked about real wars, disasters, or incidents, it would just dampen the mood. But ghost stories feel like someone else's problem, so it's exciting. See!"

At that point, she thought for a while again. "...I had a sneaking suspicion that might be the case. Lina-san, would you listen to just a little more of my story?"

When I yelled, she tilted her head and began to speak haltingly.

"What is this situation?! Blowing out a candle every time you tell a ghost story! That’s totally like a curse ritual or something!"

I wasn't exactly scared, but the fact that no matter how hard I tried or what attack spells I used, I couldn't change the fate of the characters in a ghost story—that's what I found unbearable. This was not the atmosphere for a dinner party!

"Ahaha. Oh, Lina-san. Which one did you think was the main event?"

"Why Is it a ghost story!?"

But no matter how much she liked them, I didn't think she'd change her mind with that much persuasion. Surprisingly, she looked down slightly. "But you know, they say to get a conversation going with someone you've just met, you should find a common topic. So—"

"How are ghost stories a common topic!?"

"Because, while what makes people happy varies, what they're afraid of is usually the same, right?"

"...Is that... how it is...?" she muttered in a suddenly depressed tone. She seemed to be agonizing over something for a while, but eventually, she looked up slowly. "Um, Lina-san. By any chance... is my social skill of 'starting with a ghost story to get along with new people' somehow... wrong?"

"It’s wrong in its entirety!"

"Since everyone in my family loved ghost stories, I grew up loving them too. Then, one day, I met my current husband through my father's work. He also loved ghost stories, and we hit it off instantly. We ended up getting married."

When I couldn't help but interject, she looked dark. "Don't stop me now. In the end, I haven't been able to make a single friend since we moved here...! Everyone just backed away. They backed away completely!"

She was met with a blank stare. "Eh? When you say travel stories, you mean that kind of thing, right?"

"WRONG! Usually, travel stories are about other things! Like scenery, or food, or customs!"

"Ah. Like a woman's face appearing on a cliff when it rains, or the voices in the sea near where a great battle once took place."

"That's still a ghost story!" I took a breath. "Anyway, I'll just listen to the rest for now."

"As time went on, I grew up. My father and mother also loved ghost stories, so I stayed a fan. And then, I met my husband... it was an instant connection. It was great up to that point. But I thought if I could just get in with the neighborhood wives, but if I failed, it would be bad. So I worked hard and shared my best ghost story...!"

"So it *was* a ghost story! ...And you failed miserably, didn't you?"

"That's how it went. Everyone backed away. I haven't been able to make any friends since I moved here... such things happen, don't they, Lina-san?"

As she concluded, she blew out another candle with a *whoosh*.

Wait, she's counting that as a ghost story too? Well, it was a "scary" story in a different sense. For now, I spoke up. "They don't. Usually."

"Well, to tell you the truth, the reason I wanted to invite you here and listen to your stories was because I thought someone who travels would know all sorts of stories I don't. I thought maybe a ghost story like that would capture the hearts of the neighbors."

"I'm telling you, it's impossible! Just get away from ghost stories! For starters!"

"To be honest, while talking to you like this, Lina-san... I did start to think that maybe the whole direction of trying to get along with others through ghost stories was wrong. But I love ghost stories, so I can't help it."

"Don't just say 'you can't help it'! Listen, neighborhood relations are seriously important! If you neglect that, you'll be in trouble when something happens!"

Following the momentum, I rattled off the same lines my mother back home used to say. June nodded.

"Yes. I understand that. My husband is a merchant, so he's always saying how important relationships are. But I just don't know how to get along with people without ghost stories."

"Just be normal! Talk about customs in the town you lived in before, or the people who lived there! Just tell normal stories like that!"

"I understand the logic. But—until I came to this town, my 'normal' was ghost stories. I have no idea how to be normal without them... what should I do, Lina-san...?"

I scratched my head and sighed. "...Well... if you're troubled because you 'don't know,' then you have to do something about that 'not knowing' part first. Start by making an effort to understand."

"I see. But how do I do that specifically?"

"Hmm... well... then as a test, try some small talk without any ghost stories. I'll give you specific, detailed feedback on it."

"Understood. Then... Lina-san, you probably know the story of 'The Ghost of the Stagecoach,' right?"

"Right into a ghost story!?"

I jumped out of my chair and raised my voice, but June shook her head.

"No, it's different... it's different, Lina-san. I thought I'd start with a topic everyone knows and then have a punchline that isn't a ghost story at all."

"That’s! Why!" I slammed my hand on the table. "Starting with something everyone knows isn't wrong! But I'm asking why the choice has to be a ghost story! There are plenty of other topics, aren't there!? The weather, or prices going up or down! From now on, no more ghost stories—start with something non-ghostly, connect it with something non-ghostly, and conclude with something non-ghostly... Do it over! Assume it's a sunny day and try some small talk!"

"Y-yes. Um... it's a lovely day today, isn't it?" Her tone was a bit robotic, but she was acting the part of looking at the sky. She looked up at the ceiling. "The day my grandfather died a strange, mysterious death was a beautiful day just like this—"

"STOOOOOOOP!"

As I instinctively called a halt, she furrowed her brows. "...Surely, Lina-san, you aren't going to say that a story about my grandfather passing away is a ghost story, are you?"

"I'm not, but I can smell a ghost story coming a mile away! Even if it's not a ghost story, gloomy topics are a no-go! Keep it bright and fun! Like a casual well-side chat!"

"Bright and fun...? Like something that makes the listener go 'hee hee' and laugh...?"

"Not a giggle, a belly laugh!"

"That sounds... rather difficult," she muttered with a troubled face.

She was in a serious condition. It wasn't that she had bad intentions; it's just that this style of storytelling was ingrained in her. Her thoughts naturally leaned toward the macabre.

I scratched my head. "Anyway. Make an effort every day to stay away from ghost stories and stick to bright topics. This isn't something you can just do instantly because I told you to, so you have to be conscious of it daily. ...Well, it would be cold of me to just say 'do your best' and leave it at that, so I'll set something up to help you for the time being."

"Help me?"

"Yeah."

The neighborhood wives probably saw her as "the person who tells gloomy stories without reading the room." It would be hard to overturn that entirely, but if I added the element of "but she's a good person," their impression should change.

"We're going with the royal road pattern," I declared firmly.

It was a bit late to be called morning, but a bit early to be called noon. That was usually when the neighborhood wives' "well-side chat" began. After the breakfast cleanup was done, the next task they tackled was the laundry. And at that time, if there was a river or lake nearby, they'd be at the shore; if not, they'd be at some

well, and the morning session of the chat would begin while their hands were busy! While the talking was meant to distract from the labor of laundry, it also had another important meaning: gathering neighborhood information and communicating. By tossing out a topic and gauging the other person's reaction, they measured the distance between themselves and others. It wasn't an exaggeration to say it was a battlefield for measuring the power balance within the neighborhood!

For June, who had already once fallen out of that circle, climbing back in would certainly not be easy.
A terrifying well-side gathering. But how to do it? There was a way. Just off the main street, in a back alley, there was a communal well. Five or six wives had gathered there, drawing water into tubs and enjoying some gossip while they did their laundry. June was there in a corner of the group, but the topic of the well-side meeting was currently a scandal at the Mayor’s house. There was no room for ghost stories to break in. But for now, that was fine.

I watched the situation for a while from a nearby hiding place. At first, I thought about having June suddenly scream, but I decided against it. She would probably get caught immediately due to the unnaturalness of the movement. The script was this: have some punks start a confrontation with her, let her hold her ground without backing down, and then I would show up at the right moment to make the men retreat. I would be the one to eventually chase them off, but there was no doubt June’s reputation would improve for having the courage to face them! It was a classic, cheap play, but sometimes those were the most effective.

Well, they were just some punks I’d rounded up on short notice. I couldn't expect much in the way of acting ability.

"What do you think we're doing? We're obviously doing laundry..." one of the wives said with a frightened look. One of the punks narrowed his eyes and barked back.

"Ah? Laundry? Don't give me that crap! If you’re gonna act like a big shot and talk back, make sure you finish it so it’s fluffier, damn it!"

"Look at this one, Boss. That lady over there is washing her coloreds and whites together."

"The color bled and the yellow flowers turned orange, didn't they, you moron! If you wash them in water that's had Maruda cedar leaves soaking in it overnight, you can prevent color bleeding! Put in a little effort, you trash!"

"They just throw everything into the same tub with the same well water. Can't these people even manage water temperature?"

Faced with the punks' barrage of insults, the wives couldn't say a word back. I mean, why did these guys know so much about laundry? And then, right on cue...

"That’s enough...!"

"Hey, hey. What do you think you’re doing?"

Four men who looked exactly like punks arrived with loud, deliberate footsteps. Honestly, there was no point in asking people doing laundry "what they were doing." The fact that they were covered in bandages in various places didn't exactly fit the vibe, but let's just call that a "charming" detail. They were the men who had caused a stir at the tavern the night before. I had thrashed them and made them promise to cooperate in exchange for forgiveness. The plan was this: the guys would complain to the neighborhood wives doing laundry. Of course, I had strictly instructed them not to cause any actual harm. Then, June would step in. Naturally, June wouldn't be doing anything like fighting them off with lion-like ferocity.

It was June, of course, who stood up according to the script, her voice trembling slightly. "Why are you making such complaints? This makes no sense...!"

At the same time she barked, the punk reached out and grabbed the laundry in the tub with a snap!

"—Huh?" The punk glared at her. "What? I'm saying it's no good because it's no good, you idiot! If you're gonna act like a big shot when you can't even do laundry properly, I'll make your skin feel silky smooth, damn it!"

He stared intensely at the laundry. "Don't put too much strength into it when you use the washboard, you trash! You're damaging the fibers, you piece of garbage! It’s gonna be all stiff when it's worn—what are you gonna do about that?! Don't act like you're doing laundry with this! Don't underestimate laundry, you stupid woman!"

June didn't back down an inch despite the punk’s intimidation—or whatever that dialogue was supposed to be. She stared back at the one who seemed to be the leader.

"Don't you people feel ashamed doing something like this? The woman in the bright red dress who has been piggybacking on you this whole time is crying!"

The air went cold. The punks and the neighborhood wives visibly recoiled.

"Wh... what's this about a red dress...!" the punk asked with a twitching face. June quickly covered her mouth.

"Oh, no, I'm sorry! I shouldn't have said a red dress...! Originally, it was a white dress, but it's been dyed bright red...!"

"Stop saying stuff like that! And you guys, don't look at me like that! I'm telling you, I haven't done anything bad enough to earn a grudge like that!" The leader desperately made excuses to his companions and the wives, but June just nodded knowingly.

"Ah. Then she must have followed you from somewhere. That..."

"Don't say such creepy things! Tell me it's a lie, tell me it's a lie!"

Tears welling in his eyes, the lead punk started shouting. I panicked for a second, but then I realized that even if June's talk scared them off, the outcome would be mostly as planned. However, just as I decided to see how things played out for a bit, June's ghost story gained so much momentum it looked like she might route them with talk alone.

Originally, I was supposed to appear while June was buying time. If I didn't chase them off before they ran away on their own, my image would be a bit different from what I intended. But then again, if June's scary stories escalated—

"That's enough!"

The voice rang out clearly, but it wasn't mine. Everyone's gaze shifted to the roof a short distance away. There stood a figure! Long black hair, a black cloak, spiked shoulder guards, and a skull necklace! Wearing unnecessarily revealing clothes... the self-proclaimed rival of mine, the sorceress Naga the White Serpent!

"Don't you show up right now, youuuu!"

I wanted to jump out and yell at her immediately, but doing that would have made everything a mess. While I was wondering what to do, Naga looked down at the group below with an arrogant air.

"Since you're making such a racket there, I can't sleep peacefully! Honestly! People should think about the trouble they cause others!"

One of the wives pointed at the punks. "B-but, these people were complaining about the way we do our laundry!"

The punk didn't back down either. "I only said it because your laundry methods are garbage!"

"O-ho-ho-ho-ho!! If that's all it is, then look at this! Yah!"

With a shout, Naga jumped from the roof and landed gracefully by the well. She crossed her arms in front of her chest and then spread them; instantly, her black gloves fluttered into the air and landed on her shoulder guards. Naga thrust her hands into the laundry tub and began washing the clothes using the washboard!

A commotion broke out among both the wives and the punks.

"Wh... what is this...?"

"Look closely...! It doesn't look like she's putting any strength into it, but those hand movements, like a dancing butterfly...?"

What on earth was this technique?

"O-ho-ho-ho-ho! You're all still green! Even if it doesn't look like there's strength behind it, the dirt deep within the fibers is being scrubbed away perfectly..."

"Tch!" Naga laughed loudly without stopping her hands as the wives and punks watched in shock. "What's needed for laundry isn't great power or sophisticated technique! All you need is a little trick! That's all! Once you notice it, anyone can do it!"

"Anyone... even us...?"

"Of course!" Naga replied instantly to the questioning wife. She stood up and snapped the pure white garment she was holding open. Another stir ran through the group.

"The clothes of the woman from the Meruchi family... I thought they'd never go back to their original color...!" Another wife stood dazed, lost for words. "I was joking that they weren't white robes anymore but 'light brown' robes because they were so old, but your clothes are..."

"I—I—" the leader of the punks said in a trembling voice. "Long ago... I was a professional laundryman—a 'Laundrer.' I was a Laundrer..."

He probably made that word up, but still. The punk continued.

"I got intoxicated by my own skill... in the end, I used reckless techniques and overexerted my body... I ended up with a body that could never do laundry again..."

Just what kind of laundry was he doing?

"I lost my reason for living—I became reckless. Reckless and wild. Now I'm just a punk who gets drunk at the tavern and loiters during the day. Even someone like me... if I understood that 'little trick' you mentioned... do you think I could... do laundry again...?"

"Hmph. Whether you can do laundry again? That is a foolish question." Naga flashed a fearless smile and declared with total confidence. "If you truly maintain your passion for laundry, not only will you be able to wash again, but returning to being a Laundrer won't be a dream either!"

"Ma... Maaaaaster! Ohhhhhhhh!"

Finally shedding tears, the punk prostrated himself on the spot. "Master! Please—by all means, please pass that trick on to me!"

"M-me too!" "Me as well, please!" "Me too, me too!" "And me!"

As the wives and punks crowded around her to beg, Naga kept up her triumphant, idiotic laughter.

"I’m really sorry about that. It seems my wife was a bit of a burden while I was away."

June’s husband, who had returned from his trip, said this with a gentle smile and a nod. For June's husband, he seemed a bit old, with a mustache and a kind face, but perhaps he just looked older than he was. I had taken a room at the inn and stayed in town for one more day. The next morning, June came by with her husband to say goodbye. We continued our conversation on the street facing the back of the inn.

June cast her gaze in the same direction I was looking. "Is there really nothing that can be done about that, Lina-san?"

"It’s impossible," I said, shaking my head slowly. "As I said yesterday, once it gets like that, you just have to leave them alone until they come to their senses. And as I also mentioned, it’s highly contagious, so I recommend moving out immediately."

"To think such a thing could happen," the husband said deeply.

The group was looking toward a sight.

"O-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

Inspired by Naga’s teachings, there were men and women washing laundry while laughing idiotically, clad only in black underwear.

I couldn't help but pray that this "disease" wouldn't spread any further.

(Fearful Idle Gossip: Finished)

I'm Taking Care of the Escort

The door to the shop burst open with a clattering noise. It happened almost the exact same moment I took my seat. When I looked up, I saw a familiar face at the threshold. She was staring toward me with a cornered expression in her eyes. The instant our eyes met, she made a beeline for me.

"Help me, please! I'm going to be killed!"

Along with those words, she rushed straight at me. A beautiful woman in a white dress was conspicuous enough in a place like this, but her dangerous dialogue made it impossible for her not to be noticed. The gazes of the customers present in the midday eatery shifted to her, and by extension, to me. Ignoring those stares completely, she came to the opposite side of the table and directed a serious look my way.

"—Lina Inverse! You’re probably the only one I can rely on!"

"What happened, Marlene?" I asked her.

Strictly speaking, she and I weren't supposed to be on the kind of terms where we relied on one another. A while back, we had been involved in a certain incident in Sedum City, a short distance from here. At that time, she was the rival of the person I was guarding. She hadn't quite been an enemy, but her intent to get in my way had been obvious. Even though that matter was over, neither of us was supposed to hold any good feelings toward the other. For her to rely on me, something major must have happened.

With a cornered look, Marlene said, "...Actually, the High Priest ordered me to go on a missionary sermon trip to the town of Southernsand."

"A missionary sermon trip?" I asked, repeating her words like a parrot.

From her frilly dress, she certainly didn't look like it, but she was actually a priestess of the temple that worshipped the Fire Dragon King, Flare Dragon Ceifeid. It seemed

she occasionally gave sermons to the believers. This was the first I had heard of a "missionary sermon trip," though.

She gave a small nod. "You don't seem to know. Within the parish of the church that serves Lord Ceifeid, when a vacancy for a priest arises or when it's time to tighten the discipline of the followers, priests are sometimes dispatched from other locations. Needless to say, it's an important job, but this time, I was the one entrusted with that great responsibility."

"Heh. So it's an honor."

"Of course it's an honor, but..."

For an honor, she had a very gloomy expression.

"...The person the High Priest assigned as my escort for the trip was Naga-san."

"Ugh."

Naga the White Serpent. A useless female sorceress who occasionally appeared before me—there was no opponent more terrifying if she was on your side. With that, I understood the situation. Running wild, forgetting things, and daily blunders. It was a rarity for her *not* to be a nuisance. I myself occasionally had to blast a client if necessary, but in Naga's case, she'd blast them even if it wasn't necessary. I seemed to recall Marlene mentioning that the last time Naga was her guard, she ended up with about three broken ribs. To be guarded by someone like that on a journey...

"...You'll die."

"Yes! That's why, when I caught a glimpse of your back in this town, I shook off Naga-san and chased after you! You'll help me, won't you?"

At her plea, I replied with a half-exasperated look, "You should have just explained the situation to the High Priest and declined..."

"Of course I explained it! But the High Priest only said, with a smile, that the decision was final!"

"I see... Could it be that he saw through what you were trying to do in the last incident and chose her with that intent?"

"O-ho-ho-ho-ho! I found you, Marlene!"

A burst of idiotic laughter echoed through the shop, overpowering even the sound of the door being flung open. Me, Marlene, and the customers in the shop—everyone's gaze gathered toward the shadow standing in the wide-open doorway, with the midday sun at her back!

Long black hair waving in the wind, unnecessarily revealing clothes, a black cloak, spiked shoulder guards, and a skull necklace! There was no mistaking her. My self-proclaimed rival, the ultimate negative example of a human being I never wanted to become: Naga the White Serpent!

"I wondered what happened when you suddenly disappeared, but well... Why is Lina with you?"

She rattled off some nonsensical sleep-talk about me eating alone in a place like this, yet she seemed to have noticed my presence, as she asked with furrowed brows.

"She’s agreed to take over my protection!" Marlene declared, turning toward Naga without giving me a moment to intervene.

"Wait a minute—!"

"I saw her, so while I was explaining the situation, she said that having only Naga-san was unreliable! That she would guard me too!"

"Wait a second!"

"What did you say?!"

My attempt at a retort didn't reach Naga, who was already flying into a rage.

"You've said it now, Lina Inverse! If that's the case, let's see which of us can guard Marlene more perfectly!"

"—No, like I said, I didn't say any of that!"

"I won't forbid you from apologizing if you say it now, you know?! O-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"Like I’d say that!"

I turned to Marlene, who had a momentary look of triumph on her face. I pointed my finger right at her and gave it a swirl. "Don't go thinking you've managed to set me up so easily. Every time me and Naga get into a full-power guarding battle, it won't end

with just a few broken ribs. You'd better not think you'll come out of this in one piece! Oh, and of course, the fee is exactly what you said earlier, regardless of the result!"

Marlene’s complexion changed as she finally understood what she had done, but it was already too late.

"Hmph! That's more like it, Lina Inverse!"

"Um, how should I put this... I think I've realized there are areas where I was lacking..."

It was at the dinner table that she said this with a sunken expression. It was at an eatery in the inn of a small town.

"I mean, regarding the guarding... I would appreciate it if you could do it a bit more peacefully," she said, her body trembling slightly as she lowered her gaze to the cup of apple juice she held in both hands.

"The ironclad rule is to thoroughly crush an attacker so they never feel like doing it again!" Naga said after taking a sip of her wine. "To an amateur like you, it might look like overkill, but you should know it's out of my seriousness as Naga the White Serpent! I'll sear this serious guarding into your eyes!"

"That's my line! In the face of my guarding that returns everything to nothing, there's nothing left standing!"

While me and Naga glared at each other, sparking with rivalry, Marlene could do nothing but stand there, pale.

"No, well... Overdoing it on the opponent is fine. But if possible, I’d like you to avoid involving me..."

I felt a bit of a sting being led along by Marlene's petty schemes, but I hated the idea of backing down after being told whatever Naga wanted to say even more!

"Alright, I'm in on that contest!" I barked, pointing at Naga.

By the way, Marlene's heart broke by evening. Between the time I was asked to guard her at noon today and our arrival in this town:

- ★ Number of times a wild animal crossed the path: 2
- ★ Number of times a passing traveler called out: 2
- ★ Number of times there was some noise in the bushes by the road: over 10

★ Number of craters me and Naga made with attack spells: 5
★ Number of times I cast a recovery spell on Marlene: 14

...It had turned out like that.

Well. Yeah. I didn't think I hadn't overdone it a little bit, but there were also many times Marlene had walked right into an attack spell on her own. Of course, it wasn't on purpose. Whether it was bad judgment, bad luck, bad behavior, or all of the above, she ended up getting hit while trying to dodge. Thanks to the recovery spells, she was currently unhurt, but her white dress was ruined. It seemed she had a spare, but just in case, she was currently wearing normal clothes.

This was just from today’s afternoon. Considering the days ahead, I could understand why Marlene wanted to complain, but...

"You’re being soft," Naga said, naturally showing no understanding. She dismissed Marlene's opinion with a wave. "The important thing is to break the attacker's spirit! For that, your safety is secondary!"

"The request was to protect my personal safety, wasn't it?!"

"Hmph! Naturally! I have no intention of letting anyone other than me or Lina harm you!"

When a wild boar walked onto the road, Marlene had jumped back without checking behind her, was pushed back by a flexible tree branch, and proceeded to be bounced around like a beanbag by the attack spells me and Naga had fired, finally ending up stepped on by the boar. The sight was honestly beyond being pitiful or even funny; it was a bit shocking. Thinking about it, during the last incident, her attempts to hinder her rival had resulted in saving the person instead... Perhaps Marlene was the type of person where everything backfired.

"Why is it okay for you and Lina-san to cause harm?!"

To Marlene’s tearful protest, I directed a calm smile. "Now, now, Marlene, calm down."

"Don't say that like it's someone else's problem! Wasn't half of it done by you, Lina-san?!"

"You're the one who dragged me into this forcibly. But well, I agree that staying like this is a bit of a problem."

In any case, whether the wind blew or a bug flew, an attack spell battle between me and Naga started at every opportunity. And after that, the flow was to cast a recovery spell on the ragged Marlene. The journey wouldn't progress at all like this. In fact, the distance we had covered from the town we left at noon to here was less than half of what could be covered at a normal walking pace. If the pace was halved, the time I had to spend with Naga would double. I hated that idea too.

"I have a good proposal for everyone."

"...A good proposal?" Marlene turned a suspicious gaze toward me, but I ignored it.

"From now on, if we don't involve Marlene in an attack spell during our guard duty, Marlene will give a bonus for each day."

"I see! That's not bad!" Hearing the word "bonus," Naga gave a bold, fearless smirk. "Not involving Marlene raises the difficulty considerably, but it seems worth the challenge!"

"...Does the difficulty really go up for you, Naga-san? I mean, Lina-san... isn't something wrong with that? Usually, the moment you injure the person you're protecting, you shouldn't be able to complain even if your reward is reduced."

"Well, I won't deny that," I said. "But the one hiring Naga is probably the High Priest, so you can't do anything about her reward on your own authority. You could reduce mine, but if you did, I'd lose my motivation and quit, leaving you alone with Naga. If you’re confident you can handle her reins, that’s fine."

[...]

Apparently lacking that confidence, Marlene groaned with a dejected face. Oh, by the way, the reason for settling it day by day was because if I didn't, then once someone was accidentally involved, it wouldn't matter whether they were involved later or not. This was a measure to prevent that.

"...I understand... Then from now on, please proceed with that arrangement. However, it's joint responsibility! If either of you involves me, there will be no bonus!" Marlene declared with a sense of desperation, then downed her cup of apple juice in one go.

Alright. Just as calculated! With this, Naga would probably be a bit quieter from tomorrow. To be honest, the reason I had done a bit of rough guarding today to make Marlene accept these conditions and suppress Naga’s movements was... well... I’d be lying if I said there was no part of it that was payback against Marlene for dragging me into this, but...

Regardless, after that, it was just a matter of heading for the destination! To be honest, I let my guard down at this point, as the request had drifted into an easy mode.

In the middle of the bed, I quietly opened my eyes. The soot-stained ceiling boards were illuminated by the light of a dimmed lamp. In the bed next to me, Naga was sleeping soundly. A double room on the second floor of the inn. By the way, Marlene was in a single room next door. Having only Marlene, the one we were supposed to protect, in a separate room was weak for a guarding formation, but there wasn't anyone specifically targeting her, and since the person herself had pleaded with teary eyes that she wanted to spend at least her sleeping time quietly alone, I couldn't exactly force the issue.

It felt like it was still the middle of the night. I woke up because I thought I heard a sound. Of course, it might have been a dream or my imagination. But when doing guard work, it's too risky to dismiss various things as dreams or imagination.

It came from next door—Marlene’s room.

I slowly sat up in bed and strained my ears.

...Thud...

A small sound from the direction of Marlene’s room. A creaking of the bed? No, completely different. The sound of moving a chair? Close, but judging from the position I heard it from, was it the opening or closing of a window? At this time of night? An ominous premonition ran down my back. No, that was a "no" too. Opening or closing the door?

Don't tell me! Had she grown sick of being with me and Naga and was planning to sneak away? If that happened, naturally I wouldn't get my commission!

I jumped out of bed in a hurry, rushed to the window, threw it wide open, and leaned out to look next door.

"Naga, wake up!"

The window of Marlene’s room was open, swaying in the wind and making a noise every now and then. Naga, however, gave no reaction to my call. In that case!

"The commission fee is going to decrease!"

"What did you say?!" She jumped out of bed with a shout. "What happened, Lina!"

"I'm checking for now!"

I chanted a spell. "Levitation!"

With the spell that let me float through the air, I drifted out into the night sky and entered Marlene’s room through the window. The only light was the moonlight shining in. Even so, I could tell at a glance that no one was there. The bed was messy. The door was locked from the inside. But her luggage was still in the room, and thinking about it, if she were going to escape, she should have used the door normally instead of the window.

"...Marlene?"

At the moment I called her name:

"Have you finally noticed?"

It was a man's voice that echoed from nowhere. I felt like I recognized it—he was probably using a wind spell or something to transmit his voice from a distance. The sound was muffled, and it didn't quite click.

"Who are you!"

Whether my voice could be heard as well, the answer came back immediately.

"Have you forgotten already? How cruel."

"It’s Rock. From Tuomo Village."

"Rock!"

With those words, I remembered. I recalled a young man I had encountered during a different incident. He was a man who had willingly allowed himself to be possessed by the evil spirit of an ancient king, hoping to gain power in exchange. However, in the

end, the king's spirit was obliterated thanks to my actions. I had considered the matter settled and left the village without giving another thought to Rock, who had been left unconscious.

"So, this is revenge?"

"Well... I heard there were people out on the highway mass-producing craters, and I went to see out of pure curiosity. That's when I found you. If that's the case, isn't it only human to want to get back at you? Of course, now that I've lost the King, I don't think I could possibly win in a head-on fight against you. But like this, I can at least interfere with your work."

"—If that's how it's going to be!"

Suddenly, Marlene's voice cut in.

"Are you awake already?! I was sure you were still under the Sleeping spell—"

"Marlene! Are you safe?"

"Please! Take me to the town of Southernsand with your own hands! If you do that, you'll be obstructing Lina-san's work, so it should satisfy your grudge!"

"Wait a... Marlene, what are you saying?! Think about it! That guy kidnapped you!"

"A safe kidnapping is better than a dangerous escort!"

She dismissed my words without a moment's hesitation. Rock, on the other hand, seemed a bit bewildered.

"...Is that... how it works? Well, it's true I have no intention of harming you."

"The person you are supposed to be guarding is now in my hands. You understand, don't you? What I want to do?"

Internally, I cursed my own oversight. I had thought I only needed to be wary of bandit groups and the like along the way, but for things to turn out like this...

Ignoring Rock's surprised voice and my call, she continued.

"Rock-san! Please take me to the town of Southernsand!"

"I... even if you tell me so suddenly..."

The window lock was a simple latch. For someone capable of using a flight spell, it would be easy to slide a thin plate through the gap and open it.

"Huh?" Rock said in a mocking tone. "I'd say it's more of a harassment. I've been under the protection of Lina-san and Naga-san for the past few days... and I lost count of how many times I thought I was going to die! When I regained consciousness, I learned the King was gone and left the village in despair. But then..." Their voices overlapped. Regardless, Marlene's voice continued desperately.

"I can't take this anymore!"

"Meeting and destiny, everything is always sudden. For both you and me."

"But, I don't know if I can even act as a guard..."

"You can do it! If it's you! I'll cooperate too! So please!"

"Is someone like me really okay...?"

"It’s not that you're 'okay'! It has to be you!"

"Um. Hey. You two."

All I could do against the two of them right now was offer a verbal retort.

"—And so, goodbye Lina-san. I am released from that hellish escort and shall be happily kidnapped. Come, let's go, Rock-san."

"I understand. I am a man. Let's go together."

"I don't understand at all! Wait a minute!"

I shouted to stop them, but their voices didn't return after that. This was bad. Just when Naga had finally calmed down a bit! I'd completely lost sight of Marlene and the other guy. I leaned out the window.

"Naga!"

"What's happening, Lina?"

Naga, still in her pajamas, immediately stuck her head out of her room window.

"Marlene is planning to head to Southernsand with someone else as her guard!"

"What?!"

"We won't get our commission fee!"

Leaving out the fine details, I gave a rough explanation.

"What should we do, Lina?!"

"That's obvious! We're going to chase them down right now, find them, and guard her even if we have to use force!"

It sounded bad when put that way, but there was no choice. If it were a trustworthy opponent, I might have let it go just to spite Marlene, but he was the kind of guy who would use magic to put her to sleep and kidnap her just to harass me. If the conversation hadn't flowed this way, who knows how he would have treated her? And honestly, it was highly questionable whether he would treat Marlene like a gentleman in the future.

Setting aside whether mine and Naga's treatment of Marlene today had been "gentlemanly" or not.

"Hmph! Understood!"

Naga pulled her head back inside. I chanted a high-speed flight spell.

"Raywing!"

Wreathed in a barrier of wind, I soared into the night sky. The voices of Rock and Marlene had been delivered not by a magic item that sends voices far away, but by using a wind spell. As long as wind was being used, if there were obstacles or the distance was too great, the spell should have been interfered with and the voices would have cut out. Nevertheless, their voices had been clear. In other words, Rock and Marlene were definitely still nearby!

I controlled the spell in the street in front of the inn and pulled a U-turn. Rock kidnapped Marlene to get revenge on me and set up a spell to deliver a message. If that was the case, he was in a place close enough to deliver his voice with a wind spell, where he could hide with Marlene, and where he felt confident he could escape our pursuit.

Such a convenient place was—

What jumped into my eyes as I turned back was, naturally, the exterior of the inn I had just jumped out of. The windows of my room and Marlene's room were open—and another one. A window to a room on the third floor was also open.

Exactly!

Rock was hiding in none other than another room of the inn we were staying in. If he had checked when he checked in, he could have just left the window open to allow for conversation via wind magic. Furthermore, he probably intended to make us think they were outside, let us search all over, and then head for Southernsand after some time. However, if he closed the window in a hurry, he might have been sensed by the sound. That's likely why he left it open. But since I realized it instantly, that decision completely backfired! It was as good as saying they were in that room, and they were now like rats in a bag!

I controlled the spell and flew into the open third-floor window!

The inside was—empty! The bedsheets weren't that messy, but there were traces of someone having sat there. The inn was three stories high and had no roof, but I dashed out the door!

"The door is locked tight, isn't it?"

I ran down the stairs to the second-floor hallway. No one was there either, so I went further down.

"What’s the matter, guest?"

When I went down to the eatery on the first floor, I ran into the old man who owned the inn. He was either cleaning up or preparing tomorrow's food, as he was still awake.

"Some people just came down before me, didn't they? Do you know which way they went?"

The old man frowned. "No... I've been cleaning up here ever since I closed the shop, but no one has come down."

"Just a moment ago, a man and woman pair! They must have come down from upstairs and left!"

"Even so, the front door is locked from the inside. I locked it when I closed the shop. If there were people like you say, and they left without me noticing, the lock should be open, shouldn't it?"

Indeed, I could see a large bolt across the front door. The old man didn't look like he was in league with Rock or playing dumb. In that case, Rock and Marlene had not passed through here. They hadn't just vanished. If that was the case...

"...So that's how it is..." I muttered.

Rock had likely taken a room in the inn, intentionally left the window and door open, and after putting Marlene to sleep and snatching her, he had hidden in the shadows outside. Of course, he did this predicting I would notice the open window on the third floor and turn back. While he was buying time that way, he probably intended to hide in a safe place or flee as far as possible.

However, if that was the case, there was a possibility Naga had found them!

"Sorry, old man! Let me use the front door for a second!"

Without waiting for an answer, I slid the bolt on the front door and jumped outside. Was Naga searching another street? I looked around, but I couldn't see anyone.

"Naga!"

Ignoring the late-night disturbance to the neighbors, I called out.

"How is it? Did you find them?"

Along with the voice, she showed her face from the window of our room.

"Wait, Naga! What are you doing in a place like that?!"

At my question, she brushed back her long black hair, which was fluttering in the night wind. "I'm not particularly doing anything?"

"Why aren't you searching for Marlene?!"

"You didn't tell me to search for her, did you!"

"You should know even if I don't tell you!" I shrieked, making the night air tremble.

In the end, Naga and I were unable to find Marlene and Rock that night.

The next day. It was a time almost close to noon.

Rock and Marlene came out of the inn. I finished the rest of the duck pie I had bought at a stall in one go, pushed off the wall of the house I was leaning against, and approached them with a perfectly normal stride. It was only after I got quite close that the two noticed me and stopped.

"Lina-san!"

"No way! How?!"

They cried out in surprise. The two of them had been in the inn until just now. The very same inn we were staying at.

"I changed my way of thinking a little," I said, pointing a finger to my temple. "At first, I was thinking with a normal guard duty mindset. But Rock, your goal wasn't to do something to Marlene, it was strictly to harass me. Once I thought about it on that premise, I understood."

If the goal was kidnapping, it would be natural for the culprit to flee the scene in a hurry. However, that wasn't the case this time. Rock would have thought this: In that situation, what is the method with the highest probability of escaping my eyes and the best way to make a fool of me?

Fleeing and buying time with tricks while actually being outside, as I had read last night? No. It was to have a leisurely night's stay at the inn and then walk out calmly after I, having searched all the wrong places, had left.

If the room with the open window and door was rented by someone other than Rock, then the next thing to consider was whether Rock had rented only that room.

"You rented two rooms."

At my words, Rock's cheek twitched slightly.

"First, you waited for night, went outside through the window of one room using Levitation or something, and put Marlene to sleep with a Sleeping spell. The window latch is easy to open if you slide something thin in from the outside. You snatched

Marlene and carried her into 'Room A' of the two you rented. You opened the door to Room A, and the door and window to the empty 'Room B', as well as Marlene's window. Then you just sent the sound to make me notice the anomaly, and once the declaration of war was over, you canceled the spell and closed the door to Room A."

If the window to Room B had been closed, after searching outside for a bit, I might have hit upon the possibility of Rock hiding in the inn and searched the rooms one by one. But by leaving the window open, my attention was drawn to that room. The moment I saw the empty room and the wide-open door, I was made to believe they had escaped, and my thinking became fixed on the choice of whether they fled through the door or the window.

To be honest, if I hadn't run into the old man on the first floor at that time, I probably would have believed they'd escaped and started searching the highways. However, once the trick was revealed, the rest was easy. I just had to confirm with the old man whether there was a young man who had come alone and rented two rooms.

"You were planning to wait until we, convinced you had escaped, went to search the highways or detours, and then leave the inn and head for Southernsand using a mountain path or something to avoid a confrontation, right?"

Having read that, I had left the inn hurriedly before dawn to make it look like I'd fallen for it, and waited at a short distance. Waiting for Rock and Marlene to come out unaware, confident of their safety.

Marlene clung to Rock with a frightened look.

"—L-let's run! Let's run! Quickly!"

"No... it's no use..." Rock muttered, sweat on his brow. "I can't read where the other one is lying in ambush..."

"Come to think of it—"

Marlene hurriedly looked around. Only I had shown myself boldly before the two. Naga was nowhere to be seen. Rock was likely thinking desperately right now—where had I stationed Naga and what kind of plan had I devised? And he was panicking because he didn't have the answer.

"Then—I understand—"

With a look of determination, Marlene gave a small nod and pulled away from Rock.

"We'll escape separately! That way, Lina-san and the others will have no choice but to chase me! Rock-san, can you escape in the meantime?"

As soon as she said it, she turned on her heel and dashed!

"Wait—what?!"

Rock and I both cried out in surprise. Apparently, in kidnapping cases, a strange sense of solidarity can sometimes form between the culprit and the hostage—but these two have too much solidarity!

But Rock immediately decided he had no choice but to go along with her plan and dashed off in another direction.

Ugh, Marlene, what are you doing?! But it was true that for my part, I had no choice but to chase Marlene! I dashed after her back!

As Marlene ran away, she called out to Rock.

"Rock-san! Definitely! Definitely come to guard me, okay!"

"I will! I'll definitely come for you! Wait for me, Marlene!"

Rock's tragic cry echoed back.

The distance between me and Marlene closed bit by bit. Perhaps noticing my presence, fear showed in Marlene's eyes as she looked over her shoulder.

"No! Don't come near me!"

"Mmm... this situation... from the perspective of the townspeople on the street, it makes me look like a total villain..."

"Shut up! Just be guarded quietly!"

"But Marlene, you've got it all wrong," I said to her in a blunt tone, lowering my voice. I was the one being treated like the villain here. The stares from people around us were incredibly painful. I had no intention of claiming to be on the side of justice now, especially after I'd spent all of yesterday's 'escort duty' blowing Marlene away.

"What do you mean, I've got it wrong?"

"——It’s that—"

"Nooo! I don’t want to be escorted anymore! No more!"

"I’ll be gentle! Besides, Naga isn’t here!"

"—Eh—?"

At the mention of Naga not being here, she slowed her pace and looked back at me, though still over her shoulder. To put her at ease, I kept my distance and stopped in my tracks.

"You’re a bit more relieved without her around, aren't you? Naga might have behaved a little if there was a bonus for a 'peaceful escort,' but even then, it wouldn't be a guarantee. That’s why I used Rock’s plan to get rid of her. Since the two of you 'escaped,' I suggested we split up to search the main road and the back paths. Right now, she should be way off looking for you along the detour route."

I looked away and scratched my head.

".....Well..... I know I’ve done my share of messes too, so I can’t exactly blame you for being scared, but..."

"What do you mean by that?" she asked, turning fully toward me.

"Think about it," I lowered my voice even further, speaking as if hesitating. ".....I’m sure you heard him say it... Rock’s goal is to harass me."

"Yes, I heard. What about it?"

I looked around warily to make sure no one was eavesdropping and whispered, "——Don't you get it? Really?"

"Your voice is too low! Don't be so dramatic, speak up clearly!" She started walking toward me.

I looked away from her and mumbled, ".....I don't really want to say it, but....."

"I told you to say it!"

I let out a sigh at her biting remark.

".....Listen. You were safe because you suddenly declared you were on Rock's side..... but the quickest, easiest way for him to sabotage my job is——"

I turned my gaze back and looked straight into her eyes.

"To kill you."

Marlene let out a small gasp.

"T-That's impossible! Rock-san was a gentleman. Completely different from you and Naga-san! He didn't do anything strange to me at all! There is absolutely no way he would do such a thing to me!"

"Yeah. It would be nice if it were impossible."

I didn't deny her optimistic opinion; I just kept staring into her eyes as I spoke.

"Whether a 'gentleman' who would kidnap an innocent person just to harass me would be incapable of causing you physical harm... you're free to believe what you want. But I can't see it that way. If you're right, that's great. But if it turns out I'm right, you realize there's no going back, don't you?"

"—That—He couldn't possibly—"

I sighed at her agitation.

"Whether you believe Rock or not, the fact that you have to go to Southernsand doesn't change. Anyway, for now, let's go together. Of course, you could terminate the escort contract with me right here and now, but if you stubbornly go on alone and get attacked by some random bandits, it'll be a disaster. I wouldn't recommend it."

For a while, Marlene glared at me as if I were a mortal enemy, but eventually, she gave in reluctantly.

".....I understand..... However! It's not that I believe what you said! I will decide for myself what to do when the time comes!"

"I know."

Still looking into her eyes, I gave a small nod.

It wasn't long after that I came to a halt.

"—What is it?" Marlene stopped behind me.

We had left the town and traveled for a bit through a forest along the highway. There was no one else around.

".....I feel a presence."

"A presence?" Marlene asked suspiciously.

Faster than I could focus my senses... the howl of the wind rushed past us.

"O-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

A black shadow overtook me and Marlene from behind and stood tall at the edge of the road!

"Naga!"

Sweat trickled down my cheek. I had thought it might be Rock, but it was this idiot. Usually, if Naga was coming, I should have heard her idiotic laughter first. That's what I had thought.

"You're too soft, Lina Inverse!"

The wind barrier from her high-speed flight spell must have blocked out the laughter she'd likely been letting out the whole time. She pointed a finger sharply at me!

"You intentionally sent me in the wrong direction so you could protect Marlene all by yourself and hog the commission fee! I saw right through your plan!"

"Lina, if I defeat you here and protect Marlene myself, the fees for two people will be all mine! O-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"There's no way that logic works!"

I snapped back, but of course, it was useless. Naga took a stance and began chanting a spell without a second thought.

"I knew it would come to this!"

Marlene let out a scream as the wind began to howl.

"Dill Brand!"

Naga released a blast of wind! The spell itself didn't have lethal power, but unless you were weighted down, it could easily blow a normal adult away. If you were slammed into the ground or trees, the damage couldn't be ignored.

Before the echo of Marlene's scream even faded, I slapped my right hand against the ground and released the spell I'd prepared.

"Befis Bring!"

It was a spell that dug a tunnel of a certain length in the earth. By digging a shallow, horizontal tunnel just beneath the surface, I created an instant, elongated pitfall!

"Hah! Too soft, Lina!"

Naga jumped to the right to dodge!

"Freeze Arrow!"

I kicked off the ground in the opposite direction and threw myself down, grabbing a handful of weeds by the roadside. I produced and fired over a dozen arrows of frigid air!

The arrows I fired, however—

"P-h-y-a-a-a-a-a!"

At the sound of Naga's cry, I pumped a fist in my heart! Got her!

She had jumped into the pit! I'd assumed she would jump either left or right to dodge, so I hadn't made the pit directly under her, but slightly to the side where she would land. If she had jumped the other way, I would have used the pit later, but getting her in one shot made things easier!

I immediately began chanting the next spell to fire at Naga, who was stuck up to her waist in the ground. But just before impact, Naga used her hands to hoist herself out of the pit and rolled to the side!

The arrows of ice struck the ground and the bushes behind her, freezing everything they touched. Tch! So close!

I quickly started the next spell while closing the distance on foot. Realizing that close-quarters combat was a disadvantage for her, Naga scrambled up and ran sideways while chanting to put some distance between us.

The distance closed in an instant.

"Raywing!"

Of course, the speed of me running forward was vastly different from Naga running sideways. Naga activated her flight spell! Wreathed in a wind barrier, she charged at me from point-blank range!

This time it was my turn to roll and dodge. Fortunately, this spell is difficult to control and doesn't allow for sharp turns. Naga overshot me by quite a bit. She would surely U-turn and charge again! I turned to face her—

"O-ho-ho-ho-ho! You've made a blunder, Lina Inverse!"

"Hieeeeeee?!"

Hearing the voices of both Naga and Marlene, I realized my mistake. The spell just now wasn't meant for charging at me. It was to instantly close the distance to Marlene, who had apparently been caught in the crossfire earlier, and seize her!

With her left arm, Naga grabbed the arm of the struggling Marlene, who was terrified of being 'escorted.'

"Now that Marlene is in my hands! The right to escort her belongs to me!"

She began chanting another spell! Does she mean to take Marlene away just like that?! I won't let her!

I ran toward them, closing the gap, and kicked up the dry dirt from the roadside just as I activated my spell.

"Deim Wing!"

I used a spell to create a strong gust of wind. It was like a weaker version of the spell Naga had used earlier. It didn't have the power to blow a person away, but it was plenty to blast them with the dirt I'd kicked up!

"Ugh! Gwah!"

The two cried out as the sand presumably got in their eyes.

"Marlene, run!!"

Reacting to my shout, Marlene shook off Naga's hand and came running toward me!

"Darn! I won't let you!"

Naga, flustered, started a spell. I threw out my killing blow of a line!

"If you involve Marlene, there’s no bonus!"

Naga flinched at the words 'no bonus'! I thought she would stop her casting, but she kept going regardless! This brat! She’s probably making the impossible calculation that even if she loses the bonus, she'll be fine as long as she gets my share of the escort fee!

Marlene ran past me at a slight distance.

"Freeze Arrow!"

Naga's spell was completed, and over a dozen ice arrows appeared before her. Marlene lost her footing on the ground I had frozen earlier with my cold spell and slipped.

"Kyaaaah!"

With a scream, the sliding Marlene stepped right into the long pit I’d made with Befis Bring and got buried up to her waist!

The ice arrows Naga fired came straight toward me! I jumped to the side and dodged, but of course, Marlene couldn't move!

Perhaps sensing something, she looked over her shoulder, and her eyes reflected the arrows of ice flying right at her! Her eyes widened in terror—and then!

"Deim Wing!"

A gale blew through and scattered the arrows!

It wasn't mine. I looked toward the side of the road, and a shadow emerged from deep within the trees.

"Marlene! I've come to save you!"

"Rock-san!"

Large tears welled in Marlene's eyes! Rock rushed to her, grabbed her arm, and pulled her out of the pit.

"You came to save me—"

"I promised I would, didn't I?"

Seeing the two of them staring at each other, Naga turned to me and asked, ".....Who?"

"The person who intends to escort Marlene."

At my words, Naga's eyes filled with hostility. .....Ah. Come to think of it, Naga never met Rock even once. I don't think I mentioned his name when I explained things to her either.

"Lina-san doesn't matter anymore. Right now, I just want to protect you."

"Ohhh, Rock-san—" Marlene's voice trembled with emotion.

Ugh... the atmosphere was getting increasingly awkward...!

"Well, well..... that is quite something....."

Naga, who of course couldn't read the room, was somehow looking triumphant.

"——Wait a second. Rock, you made this grand entrance like a hero of justice, but your goal is still to harass me, isn't it?"

At my words, Marlene snapped her head up.

"—Rock-san, Lina-san told me... that your goal is revenge against her... that you don't care what happens to me... that you might even... um... kill me..."

"That's not possible." Rock smiled gently. "It’s true I want to get back at Lina-san. But getting a bounty on my head for committing a serious crime isn't worth it. I wouldn't dream of it."

For some reason, he delivered these calculated lines with a romantic flair.

"Besides... after I met you while you were frightened and asking for help, and heard your story, I changed my mind. So, I would never kill you. Never."

"So—" Naga began.

"It’s a three-way battle, and the survivor gets to be Marlene's escort!"

Wait. No.

"—"

It was a confusing argument, but I suppose in practice, that's what it came down to?

"I won't let you touch Rock-san."

The one who spoke out firmly, as if her teary state from moments ago was a lie, was Marlene.

"And Naga-san, Lina-san, you will not be getting any of the escort fee!"

"Hah! Don't make me laugh, Marlene!" Naga snorted. "As long as Lina is the one you hired, you might be able to do that! But this Naga the White Serpent was hired by the High Priest! My reward will be paid regardless of your intentions!"

"B-but....."

This Naga the White Serpent had received a request from the High Priest of your temple! No matter what you try to do, I will fulfill it with a resolute—

"As of this very moment, I am resigning from my position as a priest of the Ceifeid Church!"

"Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?!"

My voice, Naga's, and Rock's all overlapped in shock. While everyone stared with their mouths hanging wide open, she continued.

"The task Naga-san was asked to perform was part of the temple's official business. It was supposed to be the protection of a 'female priest belonging to the Ceifeid Church of Sedum City'! If I quit being a priest, it is no longer the temple's business, so there is nothing you can do! And Lina-san! You were hired by me personally! Considering the

damages I have suffered, you cannot complain if I declare the contract canceled without any commission fee!"

When put that way, all Naga and I could do was groan.

"Are you really okay with that, Marlene?"

To Rock's question, she nodded and said, "Being protected by Rock-san just now made me feel very happy. That’s when I realized what happiness truly is. At first, I felt a sense of fulfillment and happiness in spreading the teachings of God through my sermons and seeing the believers become happy. But before I knew it, my goal had become competing with other priests to be number one. I had started to feel that being number one was happiness, and not being number one was misfortune. Now that I've realized that, I can no longer preach to others. If so, then my happiness is... um..."

Marlene looked down, her face turning red. "But if I am no longer a priest, then even if someone does something to me, it won't be a harassment to Lina-san anymore... Even so... um... Rock-san, would you still protect someone like me...?"

As he was asked, Rock's face also turned red in an instant. "Well... of... of course... I couldn't just leave someone like you alone, could I...? Of course, if someone like me is good enough for you, then..."

"Then, shall we go, Rock-san?"

[...]

The voice was so low in places that I couldn't hear it well, but it clearly reached Marlene, as she turned red all the way to her ears.

For a short while, Naga and I stood there like idiots with our mouths open, blankly watching the two of them whisper to each other. Eventually, the two of them turned toward us with radiant smiles.

"And so, Lina-san, Naga-san, we will be going now."

"For the time being, the two of us are going to look for a place to settle down. I was raised in the mountains, but Marlene says she'd like a place where she can see the sea..."

"Honestly, there were times I resented you both... but thinking about it, if Lina-san and Naga-san hadn't been... like *that*, I would never have met Rock-san, so it's fine now."

"I also have no intention of harassing Lina-san anymore. I don't think we'll ever show our faces to you again, so please rest easy."

"Ah. That's right, Marlene."

With those words, the two of them took each other's hands and walked away down the highway, back the way we had just come.

A long while after their figures had disappeared beyond the path...

"Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat!"

Our groans of frustration echoed emptily across the highway.

(I'm taking care of the escort: Finished)

Afterword

Author: Digital transition complete!

L: It's meaningless! I mean, you're still watching the same stations!

Author: Well, yeah, but the channels increased! I think it's just how it goes.

L: I guess so.

Author: So! We present to you the 4th volume of Slayers Smash, "The Resurrected King."

L: Oh right, the story "Terrifying Well-side Meeting" included in this volume was originally published in the 300th issue of Dragon Magazine. At that time, as a special project, the numbers "3", "0", and "0" were hidden throughout the story.

Author: Indeed. If you feel like it, try looking for them when you have some free time.

L: Is there a prize for the person who finds them?

Author: No. It was a project from quite a while ago, and hints were already given in the reader's corner of Dragon Maga, so it’s not really something to make an event out of now.

L: Hmph! No sense of fun! The author has lost his middle-school heart! If it were the author from ten years ago, he would have given ten tons of gold bullion to each of the first 100,000 people who got it right!

Author: Like I’d do that! Besides, ten tons to 100,000 people—isn't that clearly more than the total amount of gold humanity has ever acquired?

L: Well, you see, gold can be made in a supernova explosion, so if you just trigger a supernova and harvest it, you'll manage somehow.

Author: That kind of gas stove doesn't exist in a human household.

L: Boring. The gas stove is boring. ...Well, if it’s impossible, it can't be helped. Speaking of events, what about the annual New Year's card?

Author: This year's New Year's card featured the usual original illustration by the author: the "Chibi-Lina Version: Year of the Rabbit" Ze○ng Head!

L: Why the Ze○ng Head?!

Author: Well, the Ze○ng is from the first G○ndam...

L: No, I basically know that, but—

Author: My PC's hard drive started making a weird noise.

L: Whoa...

Author: So I decided to buy a new PC.

L: That's scarier than a bad ghost story.

Author: As the final boss of the... and then just that head separates... ah!

L: Hah! You finally noticed! I've been sticking to narrowband to make sure I don't play around on the internet, but obviously, modern PCs don't support that kind of thing.

L: Oh! Finally speeding up! I'm actually surprised!

Author: Specifically, if you look at the clothes you're wearing in that New Year's card from the front while standing straight, the parts from the chest up look like a giant rabbit's face!

L: Ohhh!

Author: That’s how it works! Excluding your face, of course! Hence the Ze○ng Head outfit!

L: No wonder my earrings felt different... so these are the rabbit's eyes... But speaking of the New Year, the author's electronic environment has changed quite a bit between last year and this year.

Author: In the afterword of volume three, I wrote that the fridge broke and I was cleaning the room to replace various things. The fridge, TV, and AC were settled safely, but then came December. "Mo○han" (Monster Hunter) 3 for the PSP was released, so a friend from Tokyo came over, and we were doing a Mo○han training camp.

Author: Finally, fiber optic! Or rather, people are saying "You were still on narrowband until now?"

Author: In other words! This is some kind of revelation that I should play online games to my heart's content!

L: No it's not! Don't play! Write the manuscript! And wait, I almost let it slide, but what's this "Mo○han camp"?!

Author: Eh? Just a few days of being a total loser—sleeping, waking, eating, and playing Mo○han. Is there something wrong with that?

L: Don't be so proud of it! And you, absolutely do not lay a hand on online games! You'll become a total loser and never be able to escape!

Author: Indeed. To be honest, I was scared of that too, which is why I stayed on narrowband for so long.

Author: Unlike an office worker, a full-time writer can manage their time for writing and resting to some extent...

L: Well, humans are creatures that just slide further if there are no restrictions! How about this? If the author ever touches an online game, I get to punish him every certain amount of play time.

Author: P-punishment...? What kind...?

L: It wouldn't be fun if I just told you, so how about this? Just one hint: Blunt weapon.

Author: That's basically the answer!

L: You don't know that. There might be an unexpected development, like a back-and-forth slap with a live yellowtail.

Author: Is... is that a blunt weapon? When I switched to fiber, I also introduced fiber TV on a whim, but as I said at the beginning, I mostly only watch the same programs. What's the point of that...? It's completely meaningless.Ah. But I accidentally missed the final episode of an anime, and they were showing it, so it had its uses. Also, it’s convenient to be able to watch movies I'm interested in for about the price of a rental.

L: So the blunt weapon is closing in. By the same logic, one day you'll touch an online game, and before you know it, a blunt weapon will be behind you.

Author: I'm sorry. I'll be careful not to let that happen.

L: We'll see in the next afterword if the author has been hit by a blunt weapon or not—stay tuned for that!

Author: Is that the part people are looking forward to?!

L: Anyway, this afterword is coming to an end. It doesn't matter what the answer is, as long as the author doesn't get addicted to online games.

Author: That’s true...

L: It's okay. People just don't do what they won't do. Just because the line got faster doesn't mean you'll get hopelessly addicted to online games, surely.

Author: Well, then, until next time... I'll do my best not to get addicted to anything!

(Afterword: End)